

SUPER BOWL 42 PREVIEW

SEE A DIFFERENT GAME

SportingNews

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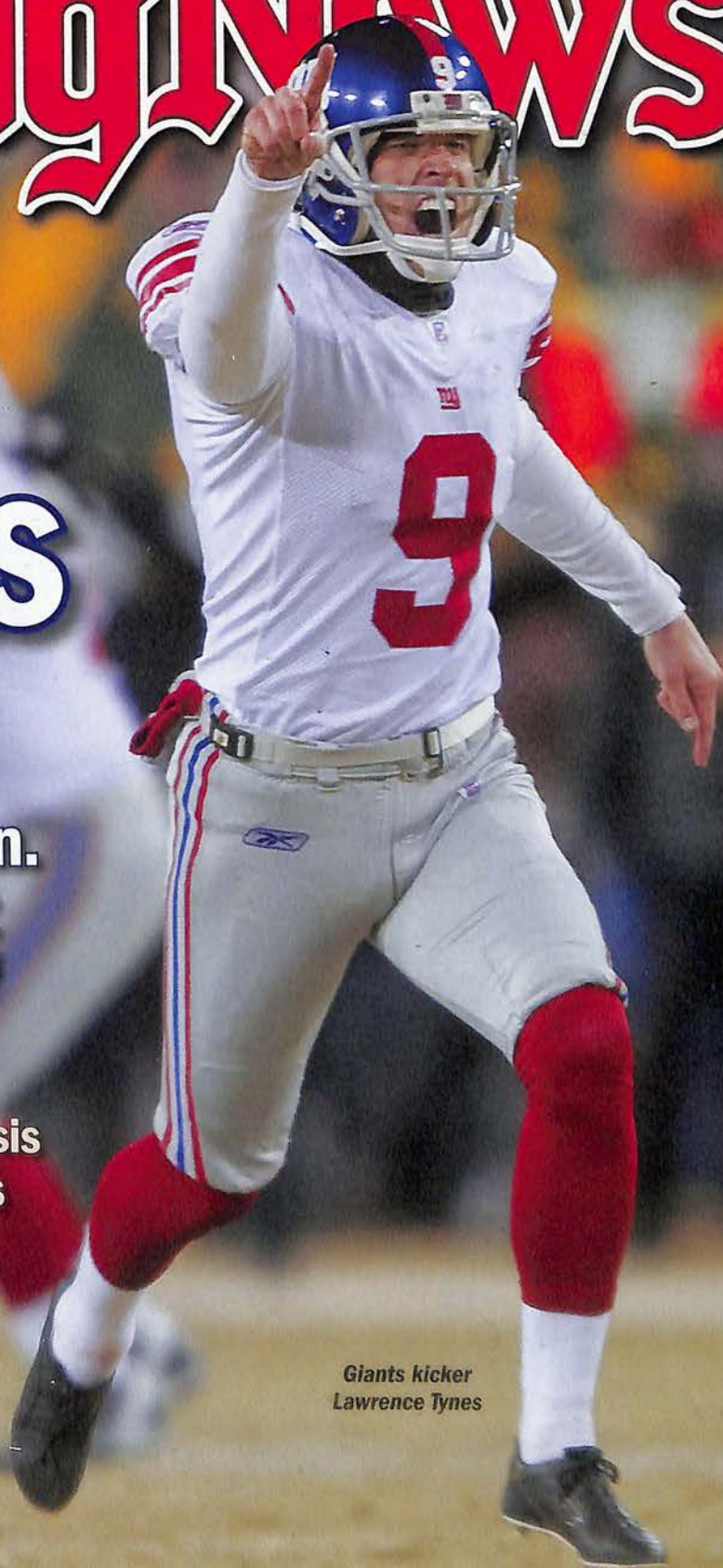
The road warrior Giants stand between the Patriots and perfection. We roll out the blueprint for how they can pull off the upset.

PLUS: Expert picks Matchup analysis
Stats breakdowns Signature plays

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Week of January 28, 2008

Giants kicker
Lawrence Tynes



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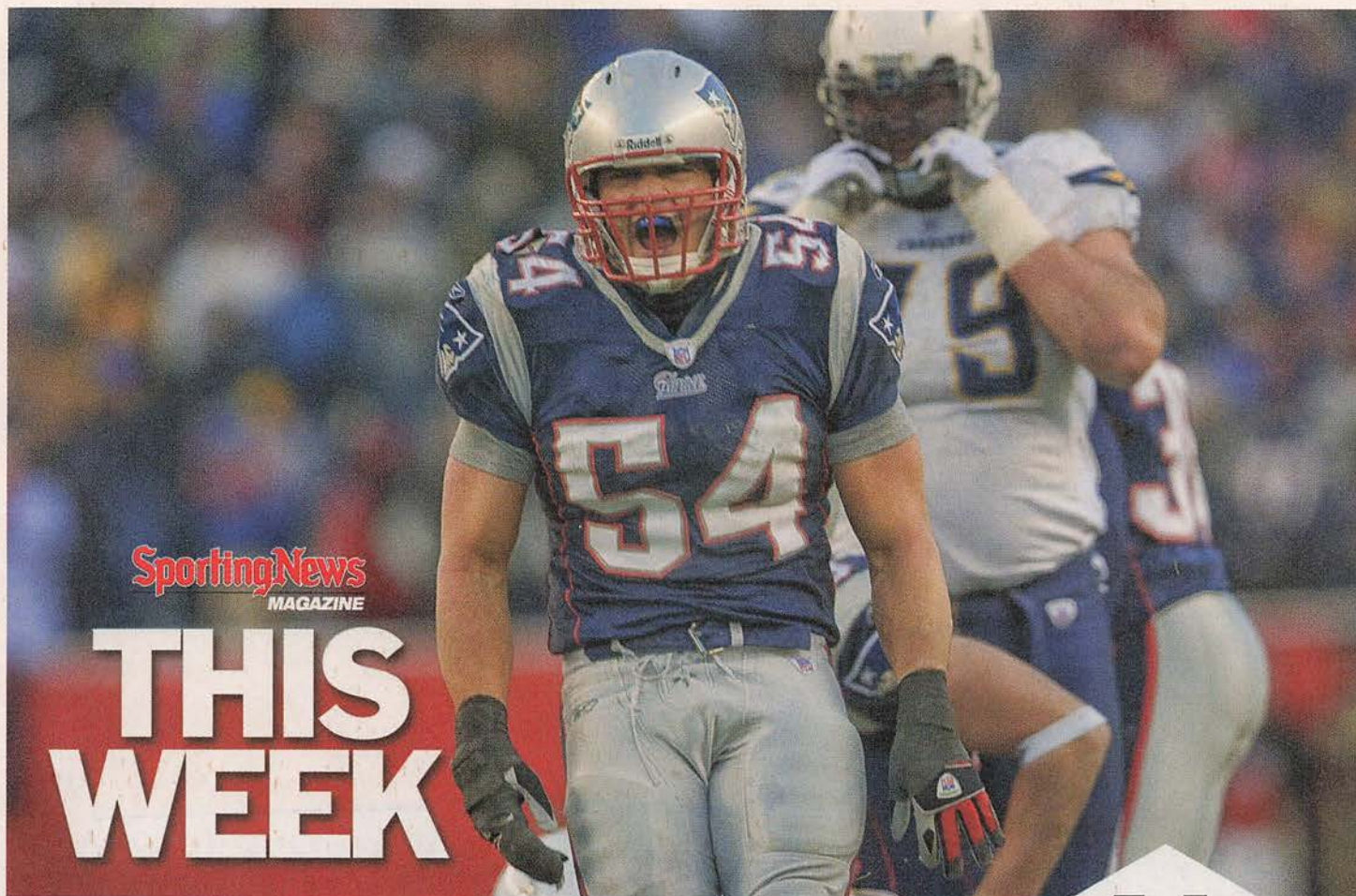


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4x4 CrewMax Limited shown with available 5.7L V8 and 20-in. alloy wheels. ¹ Before towing, confirm your vehicle and trailer are compatible, hooked up and loaded properly and that you have any necessary additional equipment. Do not exceed any Weight Ratings and follow all instructions in your Owner's Manual. The maximum you can tow depends on the total weight of any cargo, occupants and available equipment. ² 4x2 Regular Cab Long Bed with available 5.7L V8. ³ Payload is the GVWR minus curb weight and includes weight of occupants, optional equipment and cargo, limited by weight distribution. Payload is not the Vehicle Capacity Weight as defined by FMVSS 110, which will vary according to installed optional equipment. ⁴ 4x2 Regular Cab Long Bed with available 5.7L V8 and Maximum Payload Package. ©2008 Toyota Motor Sales, U.S.A., Inc.



SportingNews
MAGAZINE

THIS WEEK

COVER STORY

> SUPER BOWL PREVIEW 14 A must-see sequel

The Giants, who were oh-so-close to dropping the Patriots to 15-1, are all that remain between New England and perfection. An impossible task? Not necessarily. *By Clifton Brown.* Plus, the matchups, key players, major plotlines, numbers and everything else you'll need to make your Super Sunday just that.

> NFL

34 Rise and Shrine

When East meets West, it's all about who climbs draft boards—and who falls.

> COLLEGE BASKETBALL

46 Until they meet again

USC and O.J. Mayo scored a huge upset against UCLA and Kevin Love. Round 2 is February 17. *By Mike DeCourcy*

KNOW IT ALL

- 4 **To Know List** It's a quarterback's world. We're just living in it.
- 7 **On Deck** A measly glimpse of Beasley and a hockey shootout in Atlanta. Plus, **Bob Hille's Starting 5.**
- 8 **Catch us if you can** Updating the All-American Fan Poll.
- 10 **Your Turn** Talking baseball and a course in Rockets science.
- 12 **The pitchman** It's not like our Closer hasn't given up a homer or two.

INSIDER

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14

Tedy Bruschi and the Patriots are within shouting distance of 19-0.

Send your editorial comments to Senior VP/Editorial Director John Rawlings at jrawlings@sportingnews.com.

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COVER PHOTO BY ALBERT DICKSON / SN

JOHN FREIDH FOR SN

1st Quarter



2nd Quarter



3rd Quarter



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TO **KNOW** LIST

7 things to make you an INSTANT EXPERT this week

1

THE MAIN EVENT

Welcome to QB World



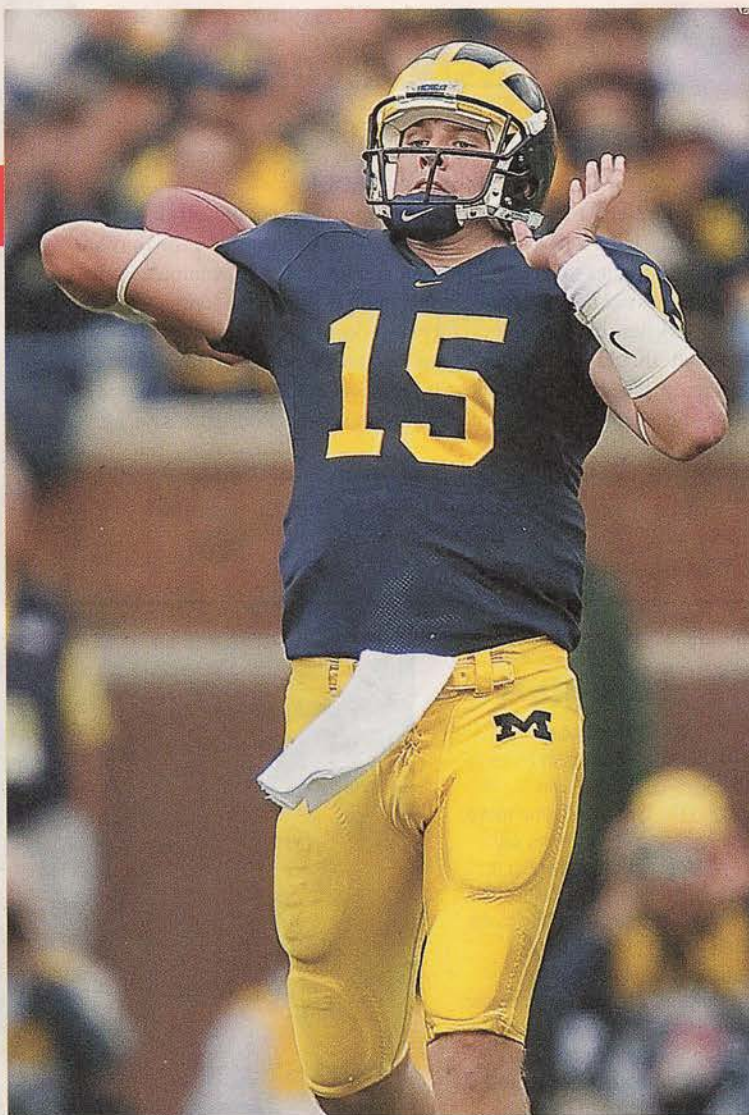
Will Pryor end up at Michigan, Ohio State or somewhere else? We know this: If he ends up in Ann Arbor, Mallett (right) won't be his teammate.

Tom Brady has the look and feel of royalty these days. But if Brady is the potentate of his sport, there is room in the football kingdom for others with wide measures of power—especially if they are in the business of producing glorious spirals.

At the same time Brady and the Giants' metamorphosed Eli Manning are basking in a Super Bowl spotlight that is more like a searchlight—Where's Eli? Oh my God, where's Tom!?—their QB-oriented coaches are getting their due. Giants head man Tom Coughlin, on a blazing hot seat four months ago, will be the franchise's leader for the foreseeable future. Pats offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels clearly will have his choice of head coaching jobs someday soon.

Then again, why be a head coach if you can coordinate an offense—say, the Cowboys—for \$3 million a year? Wade Phillips may keep the seat warm for Jason Garrett in Dallas the next couple of years, but Garrett already has a more valued role in Jerry Jones' organization: He clicks on both a professional and personal level with free-slingin' superstar Tony Romo.

Come to think of it, why risk getting your reputation trashed NFL-style if you can job-hop back to the college game and do what you do best (other than job-hop, that is): mold quarterbacks? At Arkansas, Bobby Petrino gets to pretend that



whole Atlanta thing never happened. He also gets to welcome his next NFL stud passer in the making, Ryan Mallett, who transferred from Michigan one month after Petrino said woo pig sooeey.

As talented as he is, Mallett wasn't the right fit for the offense of new Michigan coach (and devout QB lover) Rich Rodriguez. But Terrelle Pryor sure would be. The top recruit in the country could knock on any program's door and find a head coach wearing a desperate smile and a "Pick Me!" T-shirt. With national signing day looming on February 6, Pryor is looking hard at Rich-Rod's

offer of a scholarship, the keys to the Wolverines' offense and co-billing as the most famous person in Ann Arbor.

In a far less promising position is Xavier Lee, the Florida State junior who last week applied for the NFL draft. Lee went to Tallahassee as a can't-miss quarterback and will leave it as a couldn't-play kid without a clear position. Nevertheless, he is holding out hope some pro team will believe in his ability to throw the pill.

Lee knows—and don't we all?—it's a quarterback's world. The rest of us are just living in it.

—Steve Greenberg



2

IN THE SPOTLIGHT: THE RICH RODRIGUEZ SAGA

A nasty divorce

Sadly, sports really *does* mirror life sometimes. Case in point: the surreal saga of Rich Rodriguez vs. West Virginia. The divorce that—*surprise!*—turned ugly.

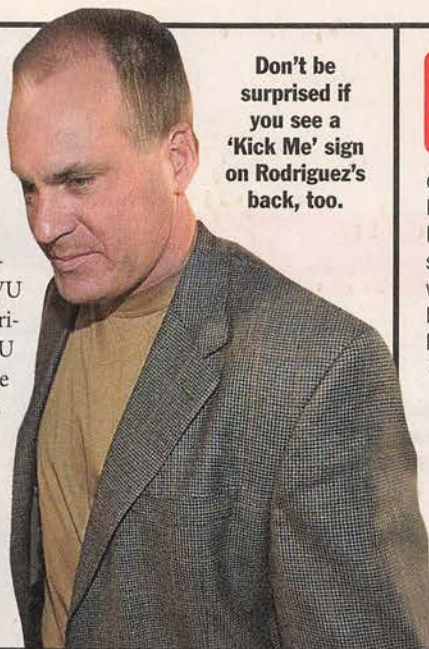
Rodriguez left his alma mater in December to accept the job at Michigan, and the good folks of Almost Heaven were, in a word, *destroyed*. WVU is suing Rodriguez to reclaim the \$4 million buyout on his contract; Rodriguez says he's not paying because WVU didn't live up to the contract. WVU says Rodriguez shredded important player documents; Rodriguez says the university should have a copy of any document he trashed. WVU says Rodriguez called Michigan recruits from his WVU-issued cell phone while still technically employed by the university; Rodriguez says he didn't.

I'm rubber, you're glue. Whatever bounces off me sticks to you!

"I changed jobs," says Rodriguez. "This is America. Sometimes you change jobs."

Who ever said divorce was easy? —Matt Hayes

Don't be surprised if you see a 'Kick Me' sign on Rodriguez's back, too.



3

ON THE SIDELINE

Feet first

No need to double take on Thursday—yes, IUPUI basketball coach Ron Hunter will, in fact, be on the sideline in his bare feet. Hunter will be coaching barefoot to bring attention to Samaritan's Feet, an organization that donates shoes to children in need. Hunter's goal is to raise enough awareness for 40,000 pairs of shoes to be donated in honor of the 40th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s death, commemorated earlier this week. To donate, go to samaritansfeet.org.

4

TELEVISION

Flex appeal

Not everybody will like it—especially not fans in Phoenix and Chicago—but it's easy to understand the flex-scheduling move that will replace Suns at Bulls with Celtics at Magic on Sunday (1 p.m. ET, ABC). Not only are the Celtics the NBA's hottest team commodity since the Shaq-Kobe Lakers, but the ferocious play of Magic big man Dwight Howard screams for increased exposure. The Celtics' home game against the Spurs on Sunday, February 10, also has been moved into the 1 p.m. time slot on ABC; Nuggets at Cavaliers will air at 7 p.m. on ESPN. —S.G.



Garnett is the man now, but Howard is gaining on him fast.

6

VIDEO GAMES

2KO'd

The popular college basketball game produced by 2K Sports won't have a 2K9 edition, parent company Take-Two has confirmed. It's not hard to figure out what gamer reaction has been to the announcement—stroll through the message boards on just about any gaming website and you'll find plenty of fans of the 2K series of sports titles who are beyond frustrated (some way, way beyond that point). Rumor has it rival company Electronic Arts (EA) is angling for an exclusive contract with Collegiate Licensing Company (CLC) much like the one it has with the NFL (the Madden series) and the one 2K Sports has with Major League Baseball. College Hoops 2K9 was scheduled for a November release. —R.F.

5

LIFESTYLES

The lap of luxury

What's better than being a superfan? How about being an ubercomfortable superfan? You bought that 42-inch high-def plasma TV so you could watch the big game in the serenity of your own castle. Now you can do that watching in style after a quick trip to sportrobe.com.



Order a robe featuring "luxurious shawl collars and soft terry velour with oversized pockets" and your favorite team logo—NFL, NBA, MLB and NHL are available now, with NASCAR and college products coming soon—for a couple hundred bucks. Throw a little more cash at it and you can get a customized name and number on the back.

7

IT BEARS REPEATING

'I'm dispatching George Costanza to be the new traveling secretary for the Packers.'

—Jerry Seinfeld, to the New York Post, in response to Green Bay's FOX affiliate depriving Eli Manning of his beloved Seinfeld reruns during the Giants' stay in town last weekend

>>>>>>>>> The week ahead in sports

All times Eastern

Kansas at Kansas State (8 p.m., YES Network, ESPN Plus). Don't know how much you've been paying attention, but Wildcats freshman **Michael Beasley** (24.6 ppg, 12.6 rpg) is this year's Kevin Durant and maybe then some. Can he stop the Jayhawks' ridiculous 24-game winning streak in Manhattan?

In the February 4 issue

The way we were. As we take one last peek ahead to Super Bowl 42, we also step back to savor the NFL season that was in a photo essay that captures the key moments and lasting images.

Surrounded by Lions, the Chargers' Antonio Gates still reins in the ball.



SUN 27 **NHL All-Star Game** (6 p.m., Versus). Their guys aren't the headliners, but Red Wings fans—with Pavel Datsyuk, Nicklas Lidstrom and Henrik Zetterberg in the West's starting lineup—will have the most fun.

THU 31 Nowitzki. Garnett. Duncan. Nash. It isn't often you get an NBA double-dip featuring four former MVPs still in the primes of their careers. So don't miss **Mavs at Celtics** and **Spurs at Suns** starting at 8 p.m. on TNT.

FRI 1 60 Minutes on Classic
(8 p.m., ESPN Classic) takes trips down memory lane with Bill Romanowski and Ricky Williams—reminders that baseball isn't the only sport with cheats and drug abusers. But you were all too aware of that already, now weren't you? —*Steve Greenberg*

5

1 Super Bowl. Good news: FOX's broadcast will include a Victoria's Secret ad. Bad news: Tony Siragusa, spokesmodel.

2 Bob Knight. Times have changed. Texas Tech gave up 53 points in his 900th win, and the football team was envious.

3 The Dolphins.

Is Parcells fixated on the Cowboys? If I'm Mrs. Cleo Lemon, I'm nervous about this QB coach candidate: Jessica Simpson.

4 Selig and Fehr. They made an odd couple in D.C. I mean, they go together like *baseball and clean.*

5 O.J. He's out on bail. But with more restrictions: No auctioning game-worn prison jumpers on eBay.

**GENTLEMEN,
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Ditch Work. Lose The Date. Watch The Duel.

Thursday Feb. 14th 2pm ET/11am PT*

We've got your Valentine's date right here!

SPEEDtv.com *Schedule subject to change.

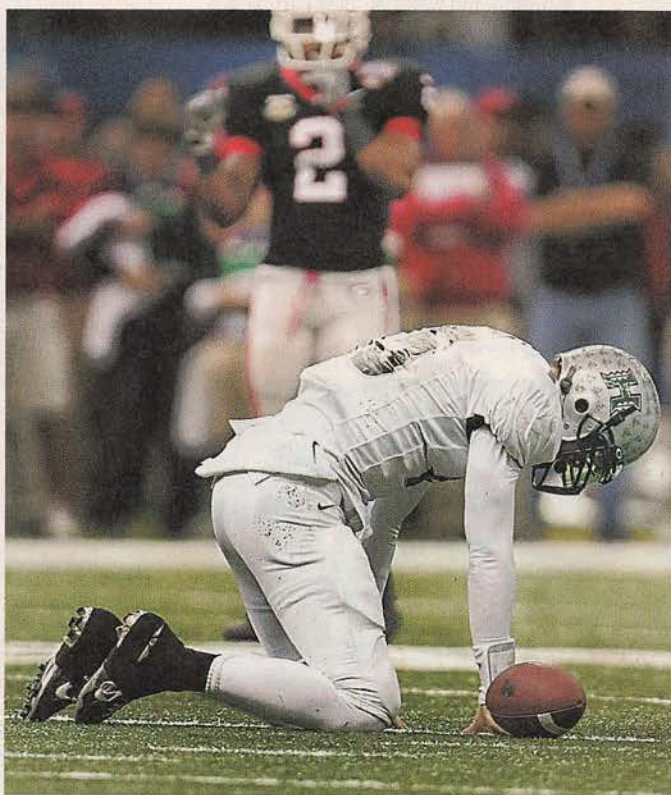
NASCAR
ON SPEED BE THERE

Catch us if you can

Our lead has shrunk—but with one last update to go in our battle to outpredict readers across all sports, we're still looking good. Sort of.



The difference-makers



Aloha, Hawaii fans! Your team did you proud ... until the Sugar Bowl.

- Correct answers were worth five points apiece.
- If both sides were right, the higher percentage of correct votes was worth an additional two points.
- If both sides were wrong, the higher percentage of correct votes was worth two points.

Will a non-BCS team crash the BCS party

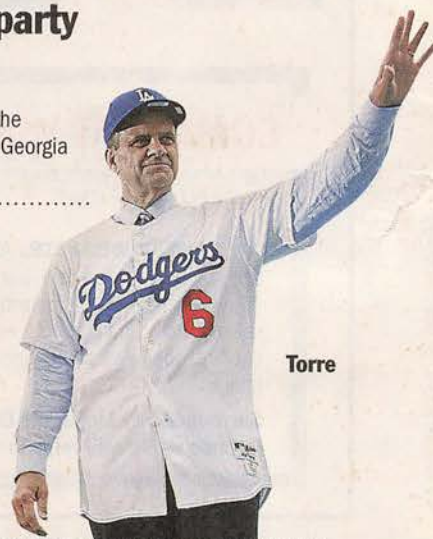
Us: No You: Yes!

> If you saw Hawaii coming, the question is: Did you see that Georgia beatdown coming, too?

Will Joe Torre be fired?

Us: Yes You: No!

> He thumbed his nose at a we-dare-you-to-quit offer from the Yankees. But a resignation is not a firing—technically.



Torre

THREE THE HARD WAY

We weren't sure how to answer these definitively, so we let *USA Today's* "Sports on TV" columnist, Michael Hiestand, do the honors.

Will the people love or hate Keith Olbermann on *Sunday Night Football*?

Us: 65% said hate

You: 59% said hate

> "I think a majority of the football audience hated Olbermann because his on-air persona is

that of an acerbic political wiseguy and people don't like elements from outside the sports world coming into sports television," Hiestand says. "He was kind of like Rush Limbaugh in that he was doomed from the start."

Will the people love or hate Tiki Barber on *Sunday Night Football*?

Us: 85% said love

You: 73% said love

> "It seemed like he was using criticism of the Giants to launch himself," Hiestand says, "but I

think people ended up thinking he was pretty good."

Will the people love or hate Ron Jaworski on *Monday Night Football*?

Us: 68% said love

You: 72% said love

> "He was well-received for two reasons. One, he was the same guy he'd been perceived to be: knowledgeable, studious and prepared. Two, people felt he brought that show with Tony Kornheiser back to football."

We were both right

Which NFL semifinalist from last season will take the biggest tumble?

Us: 73% said Bears

You: 63% said Bears

Who will rush for more yards, LaDainian Tomlinson or Larry Johnson?

Us: 85% said L.T.

You: 81% said L.T.

Will Randy Moss get onto the field as a Patriots starter and stay there?

Us: 95% said yes

You: 84% said yes

Who will be the NFL offensive rookie of the year?

Us: 50% said Adrian Peterson

You: 40% said Peterson

Will Pacman Jones get back on the field before the end of the season?

Us: 75% said no

You: 80% said no

Will the Colts win Super Bowl 42?

Us: 100% said no

You: 90% said no

Will super-recruit Jimmy Clausen be Notre Dame's primary starting QB?

Us: 63% said yes

You: 61% said yes

Will USC win the BCS title?

Us: 65% said no

You: 74% said no

That's Gordon, looking for answers after coming up short again last season.



We were both wrong

Who will win the Chase for the NASCAR Nextel Cup?

Us: 58% said Jeff Gordon

You: 52% said Gordon

Which NFL sophomore QB will win the most games?

Us: 63% said Jay Cutler

You: 41% said Cutler

How many games will JaMarcus Russell start for the Raiders?

Us: 65% said 8 or more

You: 57% said 8 or more

Which new NFL coach will win the most games?

Us: 63% said Norv Turner

You: 67% said Turner

SportingNews

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YOUR TURN

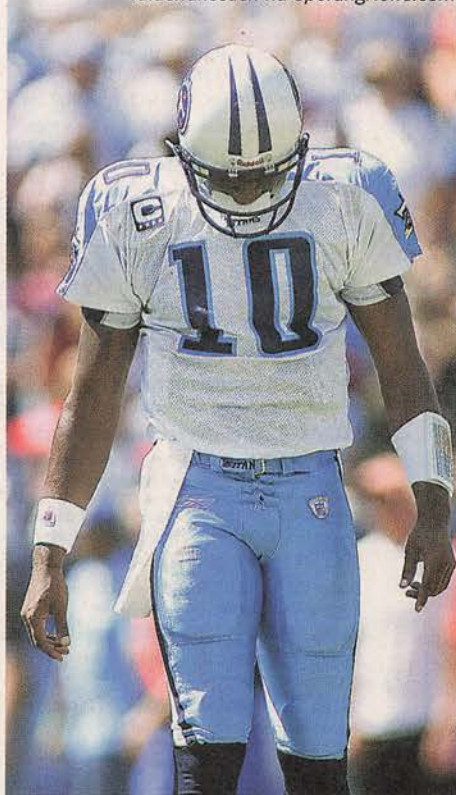
BLOG ON

From your blogs on sportingnews.com

>>>>>>>>> You rant, we listen. Send e-mails to yourturn@sportingnews.com.

It's too bad the Titans can't fire **Vince Young** instead of their offensive coordinator.

—raiderfanssuck via SportingNews.com



■ Listing Jim Laurinaitis as a potential Heisman candidate for next year (SN, January 14) is crazy. Didn't you watch the BCS title game? LSU exposed Laurinaitis for what he really is—one of the most overrated players in the country. Having a famous dad might make for a good story, but it doesn't make you a Heisman hopeful. —Scott Meckley, East Berlin, Pa.

■ Gerry Fraley's article (SN, January 14) was hilarious! He considers the Diamondbacks to have the best rotation in the N.L.? Come on! You can't find a better 1-2-3 than San Diego's Jake Peavy, Chris Young and Greg Maddux. —Tracy via e-mail

■ I don't understand people who think *Moneyball* is garbage (SN, January 14). There's nothing to disagree with. It's the survival handbook for the little guy. No one should hate it except the management of big-market teams that can't seem to buy a win. —SexyD5 via SportingNews.com

■ As constructed, the Rockets (SN, January 14) resemble a fantasy team—lots of statistically impressive players who simply don't know how to play good team basketball. If I were the G.M., I would keep Yao Ming, Shane Battier and a few others and try to trade the rest. Unfortunately, they aren't going to win a championship with the constantly injured Tracy McGrady, and that's a shame. —Dagstyle via SportingNews.com

■ Terrell Owens is a freak. Does anybody have his address? I'd like to send him some tissues and then some popcorn to stuff in his big mouth. —L.P. Miller via e-mail

RE: HOW TO TALK TO A SPORTS FAN

Posted by wassup471

Do not insult our teams. I mean it. Seriously. Most of us can take a joke, especially if you're a fan of a rival team. But if you start trashing what our guys/gals just accomplished, you will get beat down. And maybe not just metaphorically.

Don't be afraid to use a personal example. If I want to make a point about the BCS being a futile system, I could compare it to a woman. Both are ridiculously complicated and will never be understood by the common man.

Don't blame the refs for a loss if it wasn't obvious. Nobody likes a whiner. And humans make mistakes. If it didn't completely alter the game or if it wasn't blatant, don't mention it.

RE: THE GREEN IS FADING

Posted by TageRyche

The air of near-invincibility around the Celtics seems to be wearing off a bit. The main reason has to be the team's overall lack of cohesive play on defense. It seems that some chinks in the armor have developed. The Celtics need to get back into the head space they were in if they want to continue to be the beasts of the East.

POLLING PLACE

What is your favorite part of Super Bowl Sunday?

SPORTINGNEWS.COM MEMBERS

58%	The game	56%
15%	The parties	19%
26%	The commercials	25%
1%	The halftime show	0%

SPORTING NEWS STAFF



Not everyone was glued to the TV when the Colts won their Super Bowl.

Upon further review: In the January 21 issue, a photo of the Jordan 12.5 shoe was misidentified and the wrong edition of the Zoom LeBron V was pictured.

The **TROY AIKMAN SHOW**

Sirius Channel 123
XM Channel 144

Troy Aikman and co-host
Brad Sham highlight
the weekend's top NFL
match-ups with
analysis of games,
strategy breakdowns
and interviews with the
biggest names in
football. Tune in each
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news from the locker
rooms and front offices
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THE CLOSER GOES HOLLYWOOD—SORT OF: *By Todd Jones*

The pitchman

Yeah, yeah, that's me serving up the game-winning home run in a TV spot. But how many commercials have *you* been in?

As you've been watching football over the past few weeks, have you caught the latest Gatorade commercial? It happens to be a favorite of mine because, well, if I can be egotistical for a moment, I'm in it!

Yep, I made my small-screen debut playing, oddly enough, me. And I'm doing something that I've been known to do fairly well—giving up a home run. This particular commercial focuses on some guy no one has ever heard of, Derek Jeter, and in it I give up a homer to him that wins the game for the hated Yankees.

I'm certainly not above giving up game-winning homers, as most Tigers fans can attest. I've given up more than I care to recount, and it's a feeling you never forget or really get over. I can say, though, that I have not given up a homer to Derek Jeter, much less one that won a game for the Yankees.

But one day in December, my

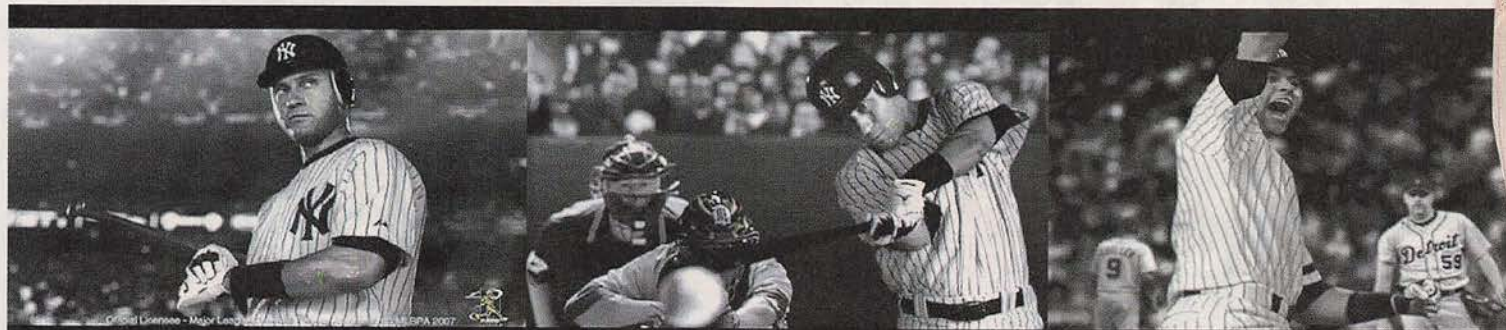
agent calls me about doing a Gatorade commercial with Jeter, a player I'm very fond of, by the way. My agent says, "Hey, you've got about 15 minutes to decide if you want to do this." He goes on to say that the company will not only pay me but will also send 30 cases of the product to our house. I'm like, "What's the catch?" The catch is that I have to play the part of the goat to Jeter's hero.

As the clock ticks, I say to myself that I've never been in a commercial and that, wow, how cool would it be to get to fly down and hang out with Derek? Maybe he'd invite me to the charity golf tournament

he has to help raise money for his foundation. I'm thinking Gatorade would probably put us up in a sweet hotel and my wife and I could get away for a few days. So I say yes and wait for the Gatorade folks to call and whisk us away to sunny Florida to shoot the spot. All will be good.

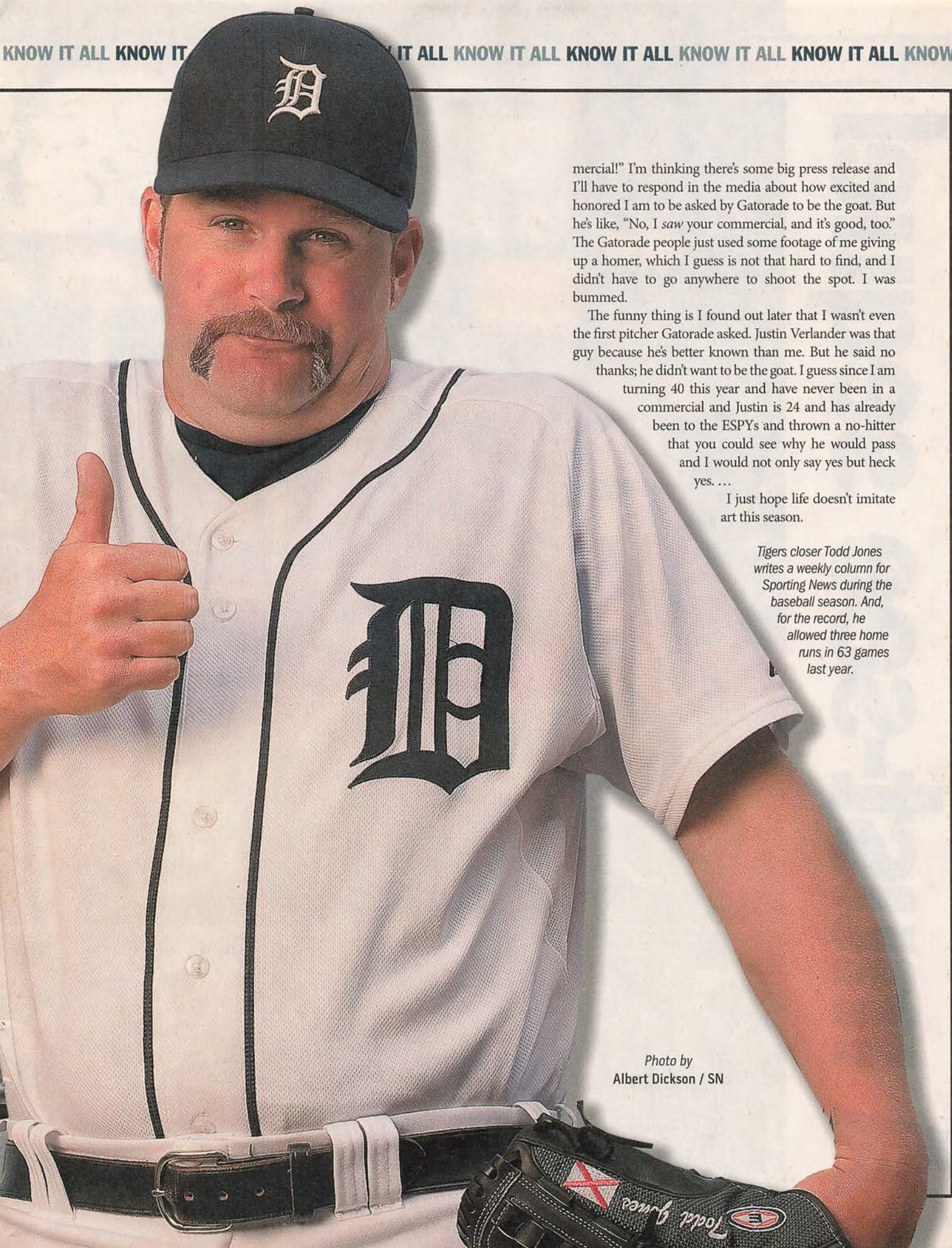
Well, not long after, my buddy calls me and says, "Dude, you're in a com-

The Gatorade people just used some footage of me giving up a homer, which I guess is not that hard to find.



When asked if he would play the role of goat as Jeter circled the bases, Jones gave Gatorade the thumbs-up.

KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL



mercial!" I'm thinking there's some big press release and I'll have to respond in the media about how excited and honored I am to be asked by Gatorade to be the goat. But he's like, "No, I saw your commercial, and it's good, too." The Gatorade people just used some footage of me giving up a homer, which I guess is not that hard to find, and I didn't have to go anywhere to shoot the spot. I was bummed.

The funny thing is I found out later that I wasn't even the first pitcher Gatorade asked. Justin Verlander was that guy because he's better known than me. But he said no thanks; he didn't want to be the goat. I guess since I am turning 40 this year and have never been in a commercial and Justin is 24 and has already been to the ESPYs and thrown a no-hitter that you could see why he would pass and I would not only say yes but heck yes. ...

I just hope life doesn't imitate art this season.

Tigers closer Todd Jones writes a weekly column for Sporting News during the baseball season. And, for the record, he allowed three home runs in 63 games last year.

Photo by
Albert Dickson / SN



**SUPER BOWL
PREVIEW**

A must-see sequel



The Giants, who were oh-so-close to dropping the Patriots to 15-1, are all that remain between New England and perfection. An impossible task? Not necessarily. Here's what it will take to get the job done this time. *By Clifton Brown*



It'll be hugs all around for Gaffney (left), Welker and the rest of the Patriots if they win one more game.

Photo by
Bob Leverone / SN



**SUPER BOWL
PREVIEW**

Mission: possible

Good morning, Mr. Manning. Your mission, and you have decided to accept it, is to beat the Patriots. So far, this has been the NFL's mission impossible. It has been accepted 18 times. Eighteen times, it has failed.

This is your second, and last, chance to complete this mission. Do or die. The Patriots are just a Super Bowl victory from going 19-0 and being recognized the most dominant force in NFL history.

I must warn you, Mr. Manning. May I call you Eli? OK, I won't. This opponent is very dangerous. Randy Moss can explode on you at any second. Do not be fooled by Tom Brady's good looks. He will torture you and your teammates unmercifully if given the chance. Coach Bill Belichick is a cold-blooded mastermind. He has been bent on world domination since the day after the season opener, when some of the Patriots' espionage work was uncovered.

Mr. Manning, your team will need all of its resources to overcome this opponent. You must be bold, smart and unpredictable. This is your blueprint for beating the Patriots. Study it. Share it with your teammates. Follow these directions as though they came from a GPS unit. And whatever you do, do not self-destruct in four quarters. Good luck, Mr. Manning. You and the Giants will need it.

1. Get physical with Randy Moss

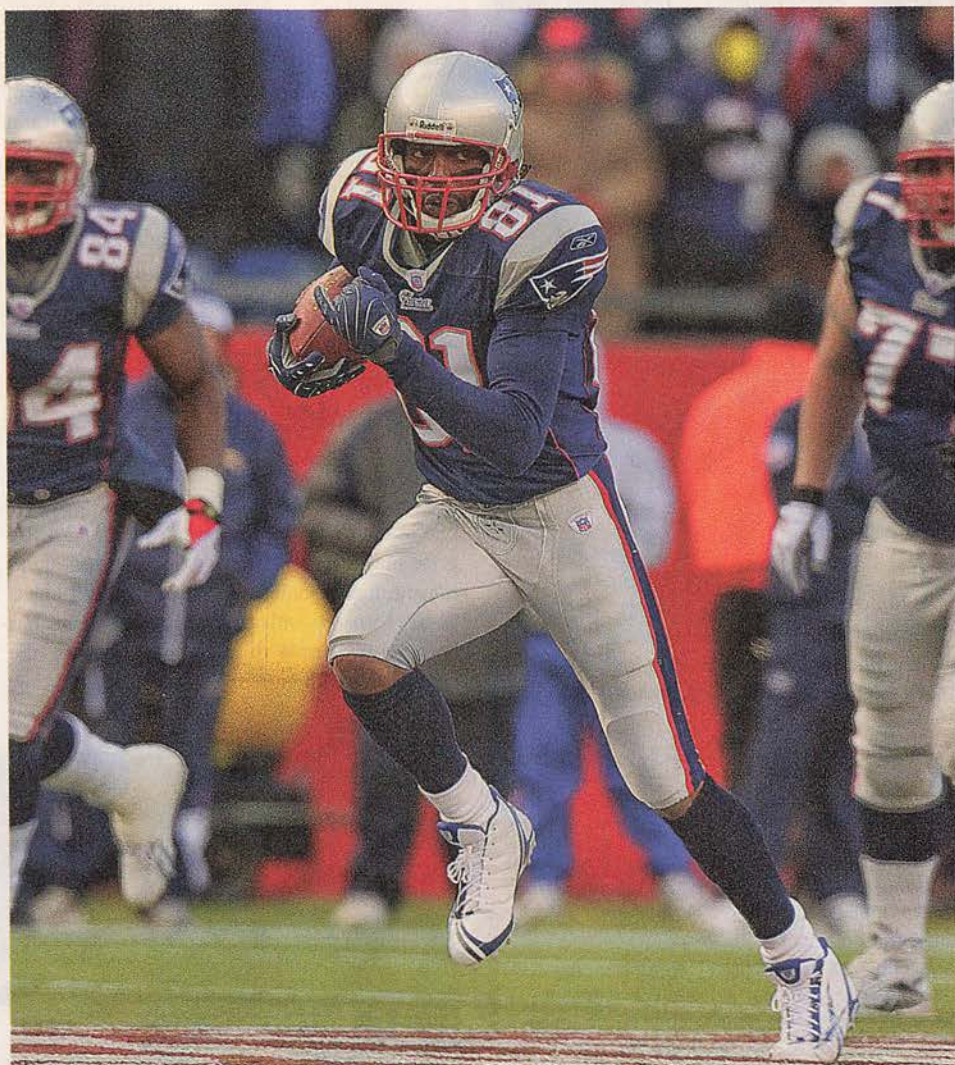
This is the Giants' top priority. Moss is one of the best deep-ball receivers of all time, but he can be contained if you delay him at the line of scrimmage. The Eagles did it (five catches, 43 yards). The Ravens did it (four catches, 34 yards). The Jaguars (one catch, 14 yards) and Chargers have done it (one catch, 18 yards) during the playoffs.

The Giants' secondary is not one of the league's best, so this will be a major challenge. Defensive backs R.W. McQuarters, Corey Webster and Gibril Wilson will have to step up. The Giants had major problems containing the Patriots' offense in their 38-35 loss in Week 17, so it will be up to defensive coordinator Steve Spagnuolo to come up with a more effective approach.

Double-teaming Moss with safety help and using bump-and-run coverage is probably the best plan. If Wes Welker, Donte Stallworth, Jabar Gaffney or Kevin Faulk were to become Brady's favorite target, the Giants would be able to live with it.










Take away Moss, and you go a long way toward eliminating one of New England's most demoralizing weapons—the quick touchdown. When you play the Patriots, you are going to give up points; they have scored at least 31 points 13 times this season (including the playoffs). However, you must take away the quick scores that can shockingly change the game's momentum. This was one of the Giants' fatal mistakes, allowing a 65-yard pass to Moss in the fourth quarter that gave the Patriots the lead for good.

If you take away Moss, the Patriots become more methodical and less explosive. The longer it takes for them to get in the end zone, the better



Moss has been quiet this postseason, but he'll still give the Giants' secondary nightmares.

SN expert picks Super Bowl 42

Chris Bahr Writer		31-30	The Patriots continue to look beatable, and the Giants have looked anything but in the playoffs.
Brian Baldinger FOX Sports		31-28	The Patriots have great versatility. Whatever it takes to win, they'll find a way to do it.
Clifton Brown Writer		30-21	The Giants will hang tough for three quarters, but when the Patriots go to the Super Bowl, they win it.
Greg Cosell NFL Films		34-31	Eli Manning is even sharper and playing with more confidence than he did in the teams' first meeting.
Dennis Dillon Writer		27-17	The perfect team will finish the perfect season in style in Glendale.
Vinnie Iyer Writer		27-21	The Giants came close to blowing the Patriots' perfection once and will fall short in their second try, too.
Carl Moritz Assigning editor		37-21	Bill Belichick will complete his NFL beatdown tour with a flawless, this-is-how-it's-done capper.
Mike Nahrstedt Managing editor		28-27	Until proven otherwise, Belichick beats anybody when given two weeks to prepare.
Arnie Spanier Sporting News Radio		34-31	The Giants should have beaten the Pats in the regular season. They'll find a way to pull it out this time.

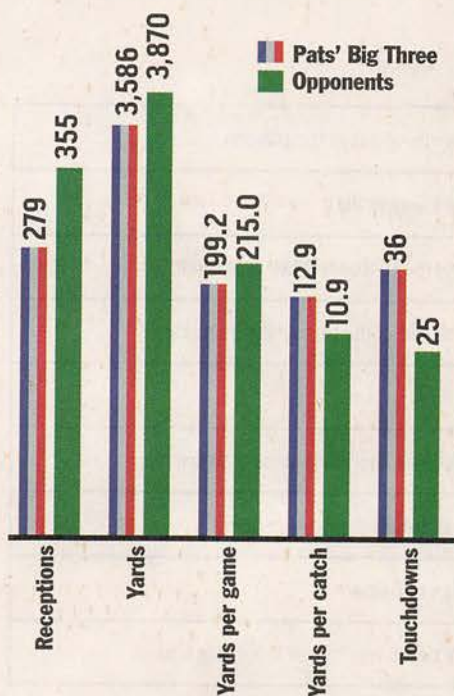


Welker (83) and Stallworth did plenty of scoring and celebrating this season.

A trio that matches most teams

Tom Brady's most dangerous weapon is a group of receivers that had a whopping 50 touchdown catches in the regular season, including a single-season record 23 by Randy Moss.

Eight players have crossed the goal line after catching Brady's passes, and seven have done it two or more times, but Brady's top three wideouts—Moss, Wes Welker and Donte' Stallworth—have posted numbers that nearly match those produced by all the receivers combined who have faced New England in its first 18 games. —Ron Smith



your chance to keep the score in the 20s instead of the 30s. The Giants should keep a cornerback and a safety in Moss' face most of the time, but they also must mix up the coverage by playing Moss man-to-man at times. If you give Brady and Moss the same look too often, they will figure out a way to beat it. Unless the Giants figure out a way to contain Moss, this game could turn into a blowout.

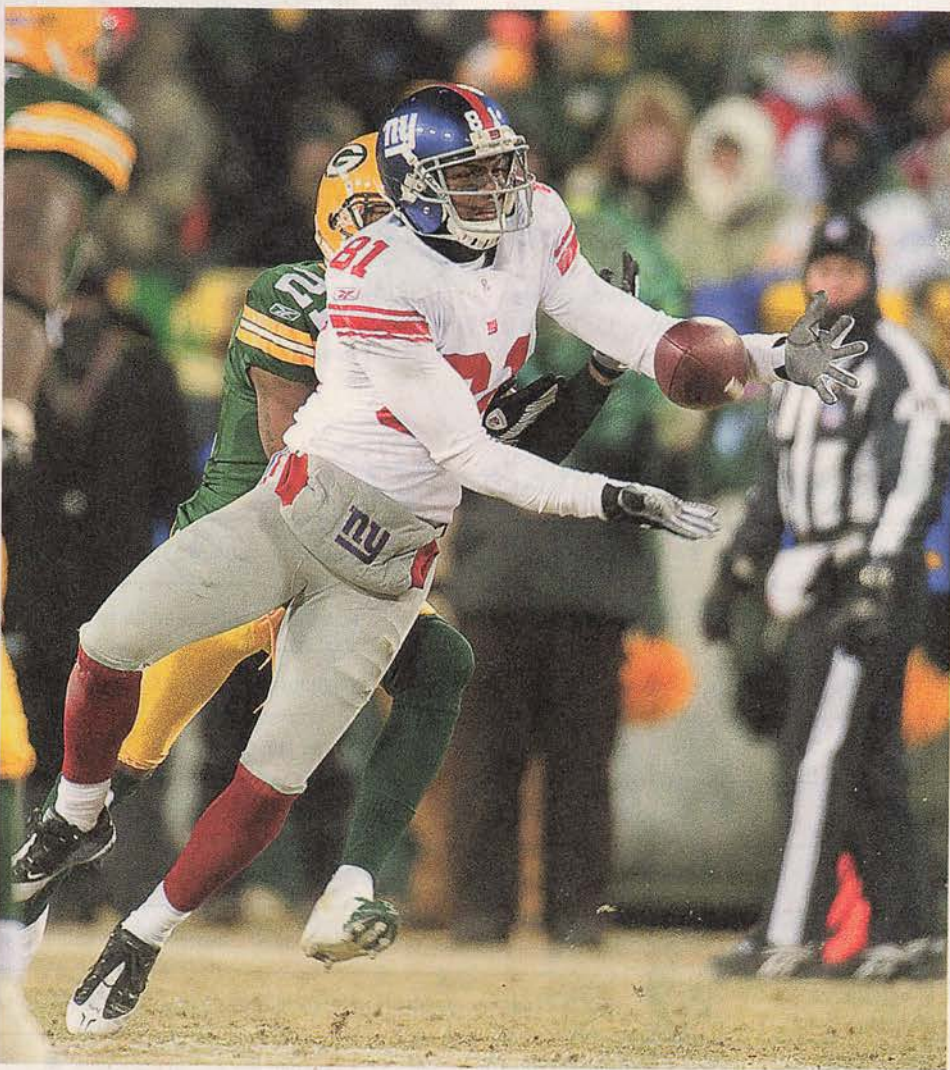
2. Attack the Patriots in the middle of the field

The Giants proved in Week 17 they could move the ball against New England. Plaxico Burress is one of the game's best receivers, and his 6-5 size gives him a huge advantage in jump-ball situations. Amani Toomer runs precise routes and has good chemistry with Manning. Steve Smith has become a valuable third receiver, allowing the Giants to go with more spread formations.

The Giants should go to three-wide sets in passing situations and attack one of the Patriots' few vulnerabilities: covering receivers over the middle. New York should use slants often—quick slants, midrange slants, deep post patterns. The Eagles took this tack against the Patriots in November, and A.J. Feeley threw for 345 yards and three touchdowns. If he can do it, Manning can.

If the Giants have to throw the ball more than 42 times to win Super Bowl 42, so what? I'm not suggesting they ignore the running game, especially if Brandon Jacobs gets it going. Brady won't win with a run-first game plan.

Covering receivers in space gets the Patriots out of their defensive comfort zone. Some of their veterans, linebackers Tedy Bruschi and Junior Seau and safety Rodney Harrison, are not as fleet afoot as they used to be. The Giants have a hot quarterback and capable receivers. If they can exploit some mismatches, the potential to pop some big runs after catches is there.



The Giants need the Toomer to be the crafty, sure-handed zone buster they know he can be.



3. Play the Manning card

Eli needs to talk with his brother. Peyton Manning won the last Super Bowl. He knows the Patriots' defense inside and out. He knows what coverages they prefer in various situations, what the Super Bowl media hype will be like, how best to prepare.

Eli has grown by leaps and bounds this season and has the unique advantage of having a brother who plays the same position and has been in this same situation. He must listen to all the valuable nuggets Peyton dishes out.

4. Dare to be different

Coach Tom Coughlin should take advantage of the two weeks leading up to the Super Bowl to add some gadget plays. Playing conventional football is no way to beat a heavily favored team.

So go deep into the playbook. We're talking

wide receiver reverses, halfback option passes, an unexpected onside kick, even a fake punt if the Patriots show the right look.

Hall of Fame coach Bill Walsh believed that one of the best times to throw deep was right after crossing midfield. The Giants should buy into this theory: When they cross the 50, why not take a shot to the end zone, with Manning's ability to throw the deep ball and Burrell's ability to outjump defenders?

5. Biltz with a variety of players—and crank it up when the Patriots are in the red zone

The strength of the Giants is their pass rush, led by Osi Umenyiora, Michael Strahan and Justin

Pressure the quarterback. Pressure the quarterback. Pressure the quarterback. Pressure the quarterback. Got that, Osi? As if he needs to be told.

Tuck. There are times when they should be able to pressure Brady, but the Giants cannot depend strictly on their front four. Brady's playoff performance against the Jaguars, when he completed 26 of 28 passes, showed what he can do in the absence of blitzes. On some plays, he had enough time in the pocket to change his jersey. The Giants can't let that happen.

Every team wants to pressure Brady, but his smarts and his line make it very difficult to reach him.

"We hit Tom Brady more in our game than any other team in the league," says Ravens general manager Ozzie Newsome. "But we never got that good, clean kill shot on him."

The Giants must blitz Brady, but from various angles and with different people. Nothing should be off limits, not safety blitzes, not corner blitzes. Give Brady something he's not expecting, and it might work.

"His study, his knowledge of the game, his knowledge of defenses, it's his best asset," says Eagles middle linebacker Omar Gaither. "Before the ball is even snapped, he's won because of his film study."

Brady eats up vanilla defenses. Vanilla is his favorite flavor. So the Giants should blitz more than usual, and when the Patriots are in the red zone, New York should bring the blitz almost every down. Holding the Patriots to a field goal once they reach the red zone is a victory. And one way to do that is to make Brady throw the ball a fraction of a second sooner than he wants to.

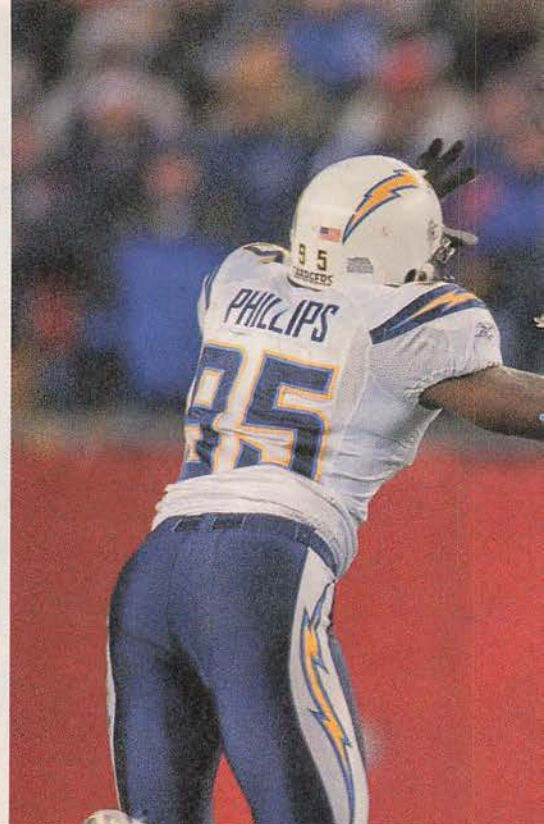
6. Never take your foot off the gas

Against the Patriots, you have not won until the game is over and you are actually ahead. Even then, you might want to stay on the field until they are in the locker room.

The Patriots' poise in pressure situations is unquestioned. "The thing that stands out in my mind about them is the confidence they play with," says Chargers running back LaDainian Tomlinson. "They always believe that they're going to get it done."

The Patriots were within a play of losing to the Ravens in early December. On New England's game-winning drive, the Ravens became conservative on defense for one of the few times all game, rushing just three linemen and giving Brady too much time to throw.

You cannot sit on leads against the Patriots. You must attack like the game is five quarters long, not four.



Freezer burn

After dominating a Pro Bowl corner in the NFC title game, the Giants' Plaxico Burress is poised to test another

By Dennis Dillon

Hanging on hooks inside the cornerback's locker was a green fur coat and a green and white pinstriped suit with a red handkerchief peeking out of the breast pocket. A shiny pair of black dress shoes lay waiting to be stepped into on the carpeted floor. Al Harris was going to be dressed to the nines.

One floor above, the wide receiver stood in front of his locker wearing a baseball cap and a gray T-shirt. The lettering across the chest of the shirt: 2007 NFC Conference Champions. Plaxico Burress may not have looked fashionable, but so what? He's going to the Super Bowl.

The NFC championship game between the Giants and Packers, played in bitter cold with a



Football's biggest stage seems like an appropriate place for the big-game Burress to shine.



7. A little luck couldn't hurt

After the AFC championship game, and before the Giants-Packers thriller had been settled, Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers was asked to assess the chances for the Patriots' next opponent.

"Probably not real good," said Rivers.

That is hard to disagree with. But if the Giants follow this to-do list, they could pull off the upset. They are a tremendous road team, and playing the Super Bowl in Arizona should feel like another road game to the Giants. Plus, New York will have confidence from playing so tough against the Patriots in Week 17. But that's the thing about the Patriots—unless the Giants play their best game, it will not be good enough. **SN**

As long as Brady has a few seconds in the pocket, the Patriots are a threat to score on pretty much every play.

wind chill of minus 23 at kickoff, was a 3-hour, 33-minute test of wills that wasn't decided until Lawrence Tynes made a 47-yard field goal in overtime, lifting the Giants to a 23-20 victory and a date with the undefeated Patriots in Super Bowl 42.

The battle between Harris, the Packers' Pro Bowl corner, and Burress, the Giants' 6-5 wideout, wasn't even close. Harris tried to smother the lanky wideout with his customary press coverage, but Burress beat him snap after snap. He had seven catches for 105 yards in the first half and finished with 11 receptions for 154 yards.

"You've got to accept that as a challenge, and that's what we did," says Burress, who knew Harris would tussle with him on the outside. And he prepared himself well.

While studying film last week, Burress noticed that if Harris didn't press a receiver at the line, he usually would try to redirect him and throw him off his route at 5 yards. So Burress decided to stay patient initially and then make his move.

"I was making all my moves at about 5 yards, right when he turned, and I was getting clean breaks," says Burress. "I would just mix it up and try not to give him the same look twice."

Press coverage by the corners is a staple of the Packers' defense—Charles Woodson was doing it on the other side of the field—but as Harris continually got beat, it seemed Green Bay should try something different. Like dropping Harris off the line by a few yards. Or giving him help over the top with a safety. Instead, the Packers stubbornly

pressed their luck—and got whammied.

Burress had an accomplice in burning the Packers. Quarterback Eli Manning, who completed 21 of 40 passes for 254 yards, did his part to make the night miserable for Harris. He threw passes to Burress' back shoulder, underthrew balls that Burress came back to get and tossed a few fade stops, where Manning would throw to a spot and Burress would use his size to get the ball.

Despite playing with a painful ankle injury that precluded him from practicing during the week for most of the season, Burress has been tough to handle on game day. During the regular season, he caught 70 passes for 1,025 yards and 12 touchdowns.

Asked if Burress was the most difficult receiver he had faced this season, Harris frowned and said no. "But I've got a lot of respect for the gentleman," he says.

The gentleman's next stop will be Glendale, Ariz., and the Super Bowl. Burress will face a Patriots secondary that includes Asante Samuel, another Pro Bowl cornerback. The Giants stood toe-to-toe with New England on the final week of the regular season before losing, 38-35. In that game, Burress caught four passes for 84 yards and two touchdowns.

This was the third conference championship game for Burress, who played for the Steelers when they lost to New England after the 2001 and 2004 seasons. "I was telling my coach I've been to this doorstep twice," he says. "This time, I wanted to kick that door open."

He did. And he was wearing the shirt to prove it. **SN**

Burress contributes even without big stats

How do you slow down the Giants' passing attack? Start with Plaxico Burress, of course.

In the Giants' first six games of the regular season, the 6-5 wide receiver racked up more than 40 percent of his season yardage total, scored touchdowns in every game and made numerous big plays—including touchdown catches of 60, 53, 43 and 33 yards.

The rest of Burress' season was less spectacular. An ankle injury he suffered in Week 2 got worse, defenses focused their game plans on him, and the team's overall passing game dropped off. Burress wasn't able to practice for much of the season but continued to play. He drew attention away from the team's other receivers until he finally broke out in the NFC championship game. —R.S.

	Games 1-6			Games 7-19		
	Yards	YPG	TDs	Yards	YPG	TDs
BURRESS	507	84.5	8	715	55.0	4
Giants*	1,419	236.5	11	2,559	196.8	16

*Team receiving yards



Practice makes perfect

That's true for the Patriots and especially shutdown cornerback Asante Samuel
By Matt Crossman

If there's one thing that stands out about the Patriots, it's their uberdevotion to situational practice. Coach Bill Belichick never stops harping on its importance, even in the offseason, perhaps especially in the offseason. It's not the players' favorite thing about playing for New England, but it's hard to argue with the results. The Patriots are 18-0 and seemingly never meet a situation for which they haven't prepared.

Before games, cornerback Asante Samuel takes that devotion to preparation to an entirely different level—he runs routes with the wide receivers during warmups. It helps him get loose, and it helps his hands get ready to catch any ball he happens to step in front of.

And again, it's hard to argue with the results.

Samuel is a shutdown corner and likely will be the most sought-after defensive player on the free-agent market after this season. He put a nasty off-season contract dispute behind him—he didn't want the team to affix the franchise tag to him—and put together a stellar season. He led the Patriots with six interceptions despite the fact most teams don't throw near him. A fourth-round pick out of Central Florida in 2003, Samuel has grown from oft-burned to oft-avoided. He will start in the Pro Bowl after this season. "I've seen that guy just come from the bottom up," Patriots safety Rodney Harrison says.

Samuel and the rest of the Patriots are one rung from the top after beating San Diego, 21-12, in the AFC championship game on Sunday. Samuel was one of several standout players on a defense that had to come up big because the offense had a rare off day. Quarterback Tom Brady looked terrible. He threw three picks and had many more errant passes, and he compiled a woeful 66.4 QB rating. The Pats' defense was a wall in the red zone—though the Chargers gained 311 total yards and had several sustained drives, they never scored a touchdown.

Samuel was a big reason for that. "Since he's elevated his game, they've elevated their game defensively," says Rams wide receiver Torry Holt, who covered the game for the NFL Network.

This will be Samuel's third trip to the Super Bowl. Against the Giants, he will be called upon to



Once the guy who got burned for big plays, now Samuel is the one making the highlights.

help shut down a suddenly formidable passing game. Eli Manning has been a revelation in the postseason, throwing for four touchdowns with nary an interception, and Plaxico Burress has been virtually unstoppable on the receiving end of his passes. When the Giants played the Patriots in Week 17, Manning looked strong and passed for four touchdowns, though he faltered in the fourth quarter. It's a safe bet Samuel will try to take advantage of Manning's relative inexperience.

"He reads routes really well," says Brian Baldinger, who analyzes the NFL for FOX and the NFL Network. "He doesn't bite on double moves.

'I've seen that guy just come from the bottom up.'

—Patriots safety Rodney Harrison
on teammate Asante Samuel

He's a very smart player. He's everything you're looking for in a cornerback."

All of those traits are developed through repetition, and the preparation proved crucial during Sunday's game, in particular on Samuel's game-changing interception in the second quarter. It came on the kind of play most teams practice time after time after time, so you can only imagine how often the Patriots do it. Chargers quarterback Philip Rivers was hit as he threw, and the pass became a jump ball between Samuel and wideout Chris Chambers. They arrived at the ball at the same time. Though Chambers outweighs him by 25 pounds, Samuel outmuscled Chambers and came down with it. The grab, which set up the Patriots' second touchdown, highlighted Samuel's best trait: He thinks every ball is his.

Maybe that's why he's catching balls in warmups. **SN**

A Super decade



SUPER BOWL 32
Denver 31, Green Bay 24



SUPER BOWL 33
Denver 34, Atlanta 19



SUPER BOWL 34
St. Louis 23, Tennessee 16



SUPER BOWL 35
Baltimore 34, N.Y. Giants 7



SUPER BOWL 36
New England 20, St. Louis 17

Here's to a fun run of games—with hope for another *By Vinnie Iyer*

This one's for John" was the famous line from Broncos owner Pat Bowlen after Super Bowl 32, when Broncos quarterback John Elway won his first of two Super Bowls after coming up short three times before. But a decade later, looking back at what happened that January in San Diego, the words might as well have been, "This one's for the AFC."

In a remarkable game that saw a 37-year-old Elway get helicoptered on the way to a key first down and Terrell Davis score the decisive points after the 2-minute warning, Denver upset Brett Favre's defending champion Packers. The Broncos' win not only provided the championship that had eluded Elway but also ended 13 years of AFC dominance in the NFL championship and, best of all, rang in the current era of compelling and competitive Super Bowls. Only three of the past 10 games have been blowouts, and AFC teams have captured the Lombardi Trophy eight times.

No other 10-year Super Bowl stretch has offered as much excitement. Even the dynastic Patriots haven't won easily. Each of their three victories was by three points, making for some of the best contests in the game's 41-year history. There was the win over the heavily favored Rams on a field goal by Adam Vinatieri as time expired in Super Bowl 36, followed two years later by a thrill-ride triumph over the Panthers, again on a late Vinatieri field goal. A 24-21 win against an Eagles team with Donovan McNabb and Terrell Owens in Super Bowl 39 put the exclamation point on the Patriots' rise to power.

The best finish in the past 10 years, and perhaps ever, was in Super Bowl

34. The Rams culminated their amazing worst-to-first season when Mike Jones made The Tackle on the last play of the game, holding back the Titans by the longest of yards.

Along the way, there have been many notable feats. We've seen the Steelers become the first franchise to win "one for the thumb." We've seen St. Louis' Kurt Warner rack up the most passing yards (414) and Oakland's Rich Gannon throw the most interceptions (five). We've seen both the longest run (Pittsburgh's Willie Parker for 75 yards) and the longest pass play (Carolina's Jake Delhomme to Muhsin Muhammad for 85 yards). We've seen back-to-back kickoffs returned for touchdowns (the Giants' Ron Dixon and the Ravens' Jermaine Lewis). We've seen Tom Brady, then Ben Roethlisberger, become the youngest starting quarterback to win a Super Bowl. We've seen Brady develop into perhaps the best post-season quarterback in the Super Bowl era.

And who could forget the Colts' win last year in South Florida? One of the league's most accomplished players, Peyton Manning, finally won his first ring, and, more important, the Colts' Tony Dungy and the Bears' Lovie Smith became the first African American head coaches in the Super Bowl.

Despite the increasing hype and celebrity pizzazz surrounding the event, the game itself is no longer a one-way coronation between comedic commercials. More often than not, it's a darned good game.

So before you think the perfect and seemingly unbeatable Patriots will make it 19-0 in an old school romp, remember that winning Super Bowls hasn't been a snap for New England. And considering that the Giants nearly ended the Patriots' perfect run once, the recent past should make for quite a Super present.

SN



SUPER BOWL 37
Tampa Bay 48, Oakland 21



SUPER BOWL 38
New England 32, Carolina 29



SUPER BOWL 39
New England 24, Philadelphia 21



SUPER BOWL 40
Pittsburgh 21, Seattle 10



SUPER BOWL 41
Indianapolis 29, Chicago 17



WHEN NEW ENGL

THE QUARTERBACK

Giants cornerbacks have improved greatly in the postseason, but their safeties are still suspect. QB Tom Brady will look to WRs Randy Moss and Donte' Stallworth on deep posts to challenge the safeties. Because of their speed and playmaking ability, Moss and Stallworth are dangerous on the perimeter—especially if Brady can establish the short passing game and get the safeties pinching in toward the middle. Moss and Stallworth will run a lot of deep fades, with Brady throwing to their outside shoulders, away from defenders.

Brady will like the matchups he gets with WR Wes Welker and TE Benjamin Watson. Look for Welker to run circle routes, which will give him space in the middle to run after the catch. Watson will run flat and drag routes toward the sideline to pull a linebacker into coverage. If the Patriots can't shut down the Giants' pass rush, Brady will throw a lot of quick passes out of the shotgun, which will give him more time to see the field and avoid the rush.

KEY PLAYERS

The Patriots have worked to establish the run over the past month, using RB Laurence Maroney to balance the offense, slow the pass rush and protect leads. In the process, Maroney has become a big-play threat. The Pats, however, won't be interested in running too often in this game and instead will try to exploit mismatches in the passing game. When they do run, they will do so out of spread formations and in typical passing situations. With the defense playing pass, Brady will check down to the run when he thinks Maroney can get into space against a spread-out defense.

The draw play will be a staple; it will force MLB Antonio Pierce to move up from his deep drops to make tackles in space. Pierce is a strong tackler and can read and react quickly, but like most cover 2 linebackers who have to match up against the Patriots, he will struggle against this attack. The draw also will counter the Giants'

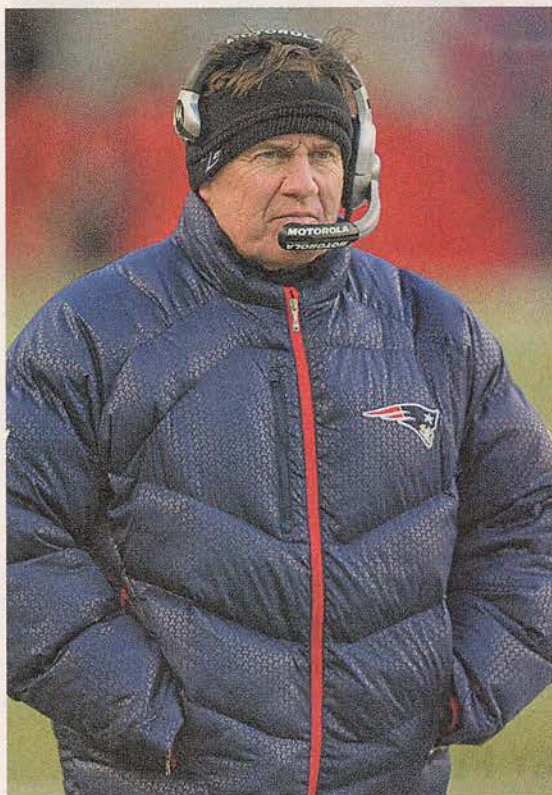


NEW ENGLAND'S OFFENSIVE STARTERS

No.	Pos.	Player	Ht./Wt.	
83	WR	Wes Welker	5-9/185	Cannot be single covered. Superior open-field runner.
84	TE	Benjamin Watson	6-3/255	Vertical threat and a matchup nightmare for linebackers and safeties.
72	LT	Matt Light	6-4/305	Good pass blocker who thrives in the Patriots' scheme.
70	LG	Logan Mankins	6-4/310	Outstanding, athletic blocker who can handle big defensive tackles.
67	C	Dan Koppen	6-2/296	Solid blocker and signal-caller who struggles with bigger tackles.
61	RG	Stephen Neal	6-4/305	Health problems have affected his ability to get to the second level.
77	RT	Nick Kaczur	6-4/315	Has average athleticism and needs help in protection but is competitive.
81	WR	Randy Moss	6-4/210	Serious vertical threat and the best red zone target in the league.
18	WR	Donte' Stallworth	6-0/200	When defenses overplay Moss and Welker, he shows his deep speed.
12	QB	Tom Brady	6-4/225	Mr. MVP is capable of putting up 35-40 points every game.
39	RB	Laurence Maroney	5-11/220	Explosive runner who gives the fast-striking Pats a reliable running game.

AND HAS THE BALL

By War Room scouts



Belichick is a master planner who knows how to best use his personnel in each game. In the Super Bowl, that will mean running Maroney (39) out of a lot of passing formations.

pass rush by allowing Patriots OTs Matt Light and Nick Kaczur, who won't get a lot of help in pass protection, to ride speedy DEs Michael Strahan and Osi Umenyiora to the outside.


Another weapon against the edge rush will be screen plays. Brady relies on Maroney and RB Kevin Faulk as receivers out of the backfield. Maroney usually releases to the middle of the field on a delay route while Faulk is given an option route that allows him to circle to the middle of the field or pivot toward the sideline, where space has been cleared by a wide receiver running a go or fade route.

COACHING

Bill Belichick and offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels are masters of the matchup game and will attack the Giants' weaknesses. Brady will be coached to use quick slants and crossing routes. Giants defensive coordinator Steve Spagnuolo, knowing his players can't defend Brady with top-notch coverage, will rely on the pass rush of Strahan and Umenyiora. Spagnuolo also will employ multiple zone blitzes to try to force Brady to hold the ball until the pass rush gets to him. The Giants will send pressure up the middle to try to take away Brady's step-up lane and flush him out of the pocket. But McDaniels can counter with quick passes, screens and shotgun formations to keep Brady upright.

SPECIAL TEAMS

Special teams coach Brad Seely traditionally has the Pats' coverage units among the league leaders. They key on good lane discipline and limiting mistakes in coverage. KR Ellis Hobbs and Maroney are fast, athletic players who are explosive in the open field, and PR Wes Welker is dangerous. Stephen Gostkowski is in his second season but already is playoff-tested and can handle pressure kicks.

 For more in-depth matchup analysis of Super Bowl 42 from War Room scouts, go to sportingnews.com/nfl.

NEW YORK'S DEFENSIVE STARTERS

No.	Pos.	Player	Ht./Wt.	
92	LE	Michael Strahan	6-5/255	Playing his heart out and making quite an impact for a 15-year guy. >>>
96	DT	Barry Cofield	6-4/306	Run stuffer has played fairly well this season and won't be a liability.
98	DT	Fred Robbins	6-4/317	Powerful player with a good first step and pocket-collapsing ability.
72	RE	Osi Umenyiora	6-3/261	Good, productive pass rusher who is helped by the Giants' blitz schemes.
55	OLB	Kawika Mitchell	6-1/253	Thick run stuffer who will meet backs in the backfield.
58	MLB	Antonio Pierce	6-1/238	Makes the right coverage calls and is disciplined in run pursuit.
53	OLB	Reggie Torbor	6-2/250	Another thick, powerful 'backer, but he's limited in coverage.
23	CB	Corey Webster	6-0/202	Lacks ideal speed but isn't afraid to get physical with receivers.
31	CB	Aaron Ross	6-0/197	Rising rookie might be the team's best cover man when healthy.
37	SS	James Butler	6-3/215	Solid run defender who is challenged by speedy receivers in coverage.
28	FS	Gibril Wilson	6-0/209	Good, physical player who comes up hard in run support.





**SUPER BOWL
PREVIEW**

WHEN NEW YORK



These Giants need to do what they do best: For Coughlin, that's wearing out the refs with his relentless badgering; for Bradshaw (44), that's wearing out defenders with his relentless speed.

THE QUARTERBACK

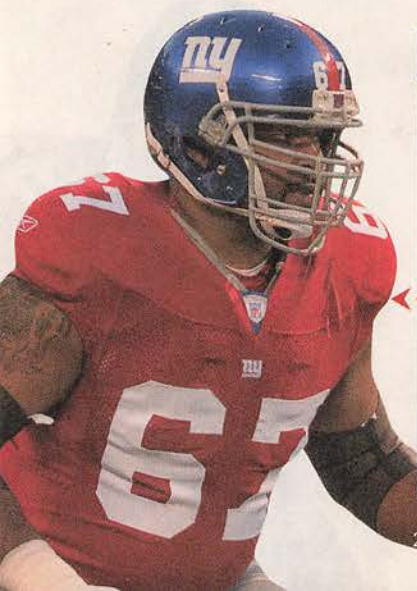
Eli Manning has raised his level of play throughout the post-season, primarily because of his ability to avoid mistakes—he hasn't thrown an interception in the playoffs after getting picked off 20 times in the regular season. The Patriots will show Manning a base cover 2, something he has seen a lot of this season—and he will take what the defense gives him. That translates to a dink-and-dunk passing attack with screens, slants and check-downs.

Manning won't attack the zone downfield very often, but look for him to take shots at SS Rodney Harrison's side of the field. The Patriots will play the run first and bring Harrison into the box. Manning will counter with skinny posts on Harrison's side to WR Plaxico Burress against single coverage—even if Burress is matched up against Pro Bowl CB Asante Samuel. WR Amani

Toomer has a good feel for zone coverage, and Manning will throw to him often on short zone-beater routes designed to get the ball out of his hand quickly and avoid the rush.

KEY PLAYERS

The Giants' running back combination of Brandon Jacobs, a huge, physical runner, and Ahmad Bradshaw, a slasher with excellent speed, has been tough for opposing defenses to handle. In their running game, the Giants have first featured Jacobs' power, then attacked a tired defense with Bradshaw's speed. Expect that to continue because the Patriots' linebackers are older and will struggle to stop the power running game. Against the Patriots' 3-4 front, Bradshaw will face too many defenders in pursuit to have success early on the outside. Look for Jacobs and FB Madison Hedgecock to attack the linebackers with the power



NEW YORK'S OFFENSIVE STARTERS

No.	Pos.	Player	Ht./Wt.	
17	WR	Plaxico Burress	6-5/232	Ankle injury limits his deep speed, but he can still be a major force.
66	LT	David Diehl	6-5/319	Former guard can handle power and speed rushes off the edge.
69	LG	Rich Seubert	6-3/310	Decent player who won't hurt his team.
60	C	Shaun O'Hara	6-3/303	Boosts the line's efficiency by doing all the little things well.
76	RG	Chris Snee	6-3/317	The Giants love to run behind this big, powerful blocker.
67	RT	Kareem McKenzie	6-6/327	Doesn't have a great motor; struggles against physical ends.
89	TE	Kevin Boss	6-6/253	Nice young player. Won't get downfield like Jeremy Shockey.
81	WR	Amani Toomer	6-3/203	Can't beat coverage like he used to, but Manning trusts him.
10	QB	Eli Manning	6-4/225	Is avoiding mistakes and working the short game very well.
27	RB	Brandon Jacobs	6-4/264	As he goes, so go the Giants. A nightmare for DBs in the open field.
39	FB	Madison Hedgecock	6-3/266	A 266-pound brute leading a 264-pound back means power plus.

HAS THE BALL *By War Room scouts*



Information out of the gate.

For the Giants to have success inside, LT David Diehl will have to seal RE Richard Seymour outside—no easy task—while LG Rich Seubert (if he's healthy) or Grey Ruesch double-teams NT Vince Wilfork with C Shaun O'Hara. If RG Chris Snee and RT Kareem McKenzie can block the back side, that leaves TE Kevin Boss on OLB Adalius Thomas and Hedgecock isolated on ILB Junior Seau.

If Manning reads the safety cheating up, he can use play-action to hit Burrell or Toomer on a corner fade or slant route. Boss is another option—in the flat. If the game is close late, look for plenty of carries by Bradshaw, who uses his speed to attack the seam and then bounces outside if he reaches the second level.

COACHING

Offensive coordinator Kevin Gilbride has done a good job of getting Manning to manage the game and make the most of his opportunities off play-action. Expect Gilbride to keep things simple. He'll make sure Manning is focused on his presnap reads and recognizes the many blitz looks the Patriots will use out of their 3-4 front. OLBs Thomas and Mike Vrabel will line up all over the field, and they do a good job of faking the blitz and dropping into coverage. With Harrison playing predominantly in the box, the Pats will be able to send either Vrabel or Thomas off the edge while crashing their ends inside to create one-on-one mismatches. Gilbride and coach Tom Coughlin will counter by limiting Manning's pass attempts and focusing on the running game and short passing game.

SPECIAL TEAMS

The Giants have consistently won the field-position battle in the postseason thanks to explosive return men Domenik Hixon and R.W. McQuarters. P Jeff Feagles is a veteran with postseason experience, but K Lawrence Tynes has to be considered a liability at this point. He hit the game-winner in overtime at Green Bay, but he didn't build the confidence of Coughlin and his staff with two fourth quarter misses.

NEW ENGLAND'S DEFENSIVE STARTERS

No.	Pos.	Player	Ht./Wt.	
94	LE	Ty Warren	6-5/300	The consummate professional. Technician who is asked to do a lot.
75	NT	Vince Wilfork	6-2/325	The defensive key. He's big and thick and beats double-teams regularly.
93	RE	Richard Seymour	6-6/310	Has struggled because of injuries, but he can dominate when healthy.
50	OLB	Mike Vrabel	6-4/261	Mr. Versatility can pass-rush, stop the run and deliver in big situations.
55	ILB	Junior Seau	6-3/250	Age is catching up to him. Still physical and plays with great intensity.
54	ILB	Tedy Bruschi	6-1/247	Is losing mobility and plays more with brains than athletic ability.
96	OLB	Adalius Thomas	6-2/270	Has not met pass-rush expectations but still is good in this scheme.
22	CB	Asante Samuel	5-10/185	One of the NFL's best zone cover corners. Plays like a young Ty Law.
27	CB	Ellis Hobbs	5-9/195	Gets a lot of work because teams avoid Samuel. Plays best in zone.
37	SS	Rodney Harrison	6-1/220	Always tries to make big plays. Guesses to compensate for a lack of range.
36	FS	James Sanders	5-10/210	Good but not great player who has decent range.





PATRIOTS

BY THE NUMBERS

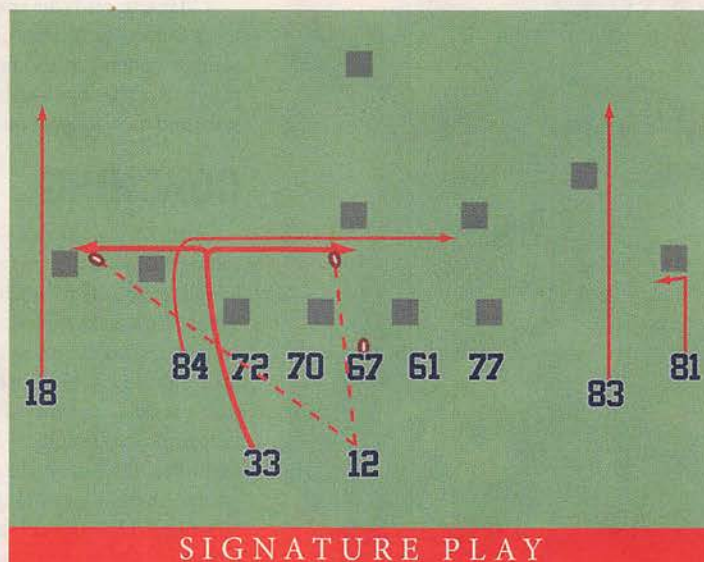
RESULTS

Regular season: 16-0

1	at N.Y. Jets	W, 38-14
2	San Diego	W, 38-14
3	Buffalo	W, 38-7
4	at Cincinnati	W, 34-13
5	Cleveland	W, 34-17
6	at Dallas	W, 48-27
7	at Miami	W, 49-28
8	Washington	W, 52-7
9	at Indianapolis	W, 24-20
10	Open date	
11	at Buffalo	W, 56-10
12	Philadelphia	W, 31-28
13	at Baltimore	W, 27-24
14	Pittsburgh	W, 34-13
15	N.Y. Jets	W, 20-10
16	Miami	W, 28-7
17	at N.Y. Giants	W, 38-35

Playoffs: 2-0

Round 1	Bye	
Round 2	Jacksonville	W, 31-20
Round 3	San Diego	W, 21-12



Faulk option

On third downs, with 4 to 8 yards needed for a first down, the Patriots like to clear out the middle and get the ball to Kevin Faulk (33). They line up in one of their base formations, with Tom Brady (12) in the shotgun and Faulk set up to the left of Brady. Donte Stallworth (18) and Wes Welker (83) run go routes while Randy Moss (81) runs a 5-yard stop route to hold the corner and maybe coax a safety out of the middle. Benjamin Watson (84) runs a drag route in front of the linebackers, hoping to get the middle 'backer to follow him. Faulk runs a circle route behind Watson. If the middle linebacker follows Watson, Brady will hit Faulk with a short pass in the middle of the field. If the linebacker stays home, Faulk will head back to the left in the area cleared out by Stallworth. Faulk is an ideal third-down back because he has excellent hands and the ability to maneuver for yards after the catch.

HEAD2HEAD Regular-season statistics

	Points	Points allowed	Rushing yards	Rushing yards allowed	Passing yards	Passing yards allowed	Yards per play	Yards allowed per play	Total offense
Patriots	36.8	17.1	115.6	98.2	295.7	190.1	6.2	4.9	411.2
Giants	23.3	21.9	134.2	97.7	197.1	207.3	5.1	5.0	331.4



KEVIN FAULK is the guy the Patriots turn to when they're in a pinch on third down.

Individual leaders *(regular season)*

PASSING

	Att.	Comp.	Yards	TD	Int.	Rating
Tom Brady	578	398	4,806	50	8	117.2

RUSHING

	Att.	Yards	Avg.	TD
Laurence Maroney	185	835	4.5	6
Kevin Faulk	62	265	4.3	0

RECEIVING

	Rec.	Yards	Avg.	TD
Wes Welker	112	1,175	10.5	8
Randy Moss	98	1,493	15.2	23
Kevin Faulk	47	383	8.1	1
Donte' Stallworth	46	697	15.2	3
Jabar Gaffney	36	449	12.5	5
Benjamin Watson	36	389	10.8	6

SACKS

Mike Vrabel	12½
Jarvis Green	6½
Adalius Thomas	6½

INTERCEPTIONS

Asante Samuel	6
Randall Gay	3
Junior Seau	3



Vrabel

KICKING

	XPM	XPA	FGM	FGA	Points
Stephen Gostkowski	74	74	21	24	137

PUNTING

	No.	Avg.	Net	IN 20
Chris Hanson	44	41.4	36.1	13

KICKOFF RETURNS

	No.	Avg.	TD
Ellis Hobbs	35	26.0	1

PUNT RETURNS

	No.	Avg.	TD
Wes Welker	25	10.0	0



Total defense

288.3

305.0



Kick return average

25.2

23.9



Kick return avg. allowed

22.1

23.1



Punt return average

9.4

7.4



Punt return avg. allowed

5.4

6.2



Penalty yards

43.1

40.8



Time of possession

32:31

31:22



Third-down conversion %

48.2

41.6



Fourth-down conversion %

71.4

35.3



Turnover differential

+16

-9



GIANTS

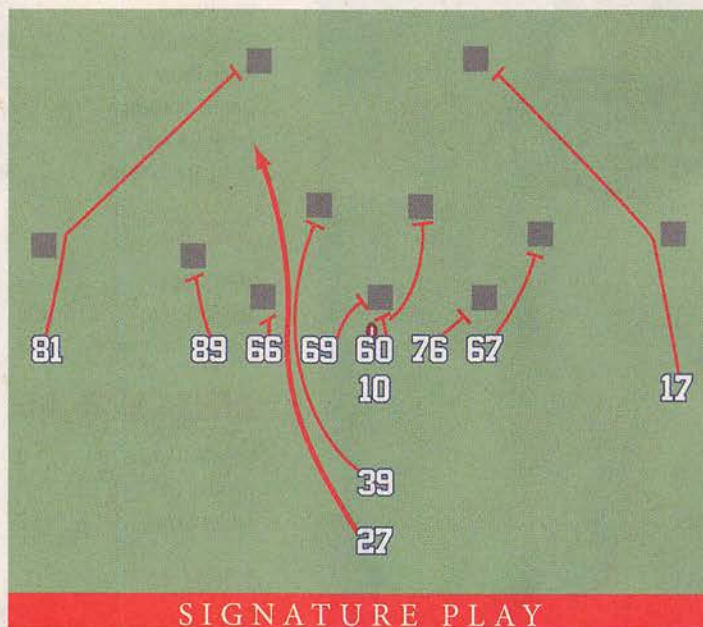
BY THE NUMBERS

AMANI TOOMER has a good rapport with Eli Manning, especially in the red zone, where Manning knows how Toomer reads coverages and where he will go.

RESULTS

Regular season: 11-5		
1	at Dallas	W, 35-45
2	Green Bay	L, 35-13
3	at Washington	W, 24-17
4	Philadelphia	W, 16-3
5	N.Y. Jets	W, 35-24
6	at Atlanta	W, 31-10
7	San Francisco	W, 33-15
8	vs. Miami*	W, 13-10
9	Open date	
10	Dallas	L, 31-20
11	at Detroit	W, 16-10
12	Minnesota	L, 41-17
13	at Chicago	W, 21-16
14	at Philadelphia	W, 16-13
15	Washington	L, 22-10
16	at Buffalo	W, 38-21
17	New England	L, 38-35
Playoffs: 3-0		
Round 1	at Tampa Bay	W, 24-14
Round 2	at Dallas	W, 21-17
Round 3	at Green Bay	W, 23-20, OT

*At London.



Power I

The Giants wear down defenses with a power game that features the biggest, baddest fullback-halfback combo in the league. By thrusting 530 pounds—Madison Hedgecock and Brandon Jacobs—at defenses, the Giants gradually take command of the line of scrimmage. The I formation allows Hedgecock (39) to clear the way with a full head of steam before Jacobs (27) comes in. Rich Seubert (69) blocks down on the nose tackle in an effort to seal him inside while David Diehl (66) pushes out the end and Kevin Boss (89) engages the outside linebacker. Shaun O'Hara (60) tries to seal off the left inside linebacker, and Hedgecock blasts into the guard-tackle gap and focuses on the right inside linebacker. Jacobs follows closely and is ready to bounce outside once he gets through the second level.

AND THE WINNER IS ...



Quarterback



Running backs



Receivers



Offensive line



Defensive line



Linebackers



Secondary



Pass rushers



Special teams



Individual leaders (regular season)

PASSING

	Att.	Comp.	Yards	TD	Int.	Rating
Eli Manning	529	297	3,336	23	20	73.9

RUSHING

	Att.	Yards	Avg.	TD
Brandon Jacobs	202	1,009	5.0	4
Reuben Droughns	85	275	3.2	6
Ahmad Bradshaw	23	190	8.3	1

RECEIVING

	Rec.	Yards	Avg.	TD
Plaxico Burress	70	1,025	14.6	12
Amani Toomer	59	760	12.9	3
Brandon Jacobs	23	174	7.6	2
Sinorice Moss	21	225	10.7	0
Kevin Boss	9	118	13.1	2
Steve Smith	8	63	7.9	0

SACKS

Osi Umenyiora	13
Justin Tuck	10
Michael Strahan	9

INTERCEPTIONS

Sam Madison	4
Gibril Wilson	4
Aaron Ross	3



Umenyiora

KICKING

	XPM	XPA	FGM	FGA	Points
Lawrence Tynes	40	42	23	27	109

PUNTING

	No.	Avg.	Net	In 20
Jeff Feagles	71	40.4	36.0	25

KICKOFF RETURNS

	No.	Avg.	TD
Ahmad Bradshaw	38	24.2	0
Domenik Hixon	8	27.6	1

PUNT RETURNS

	No.	Avg.	TD
R.W. McQuarters	42	7.6	0



Depth



Coaching

PREDICTION

**New England 27,
New York 24**

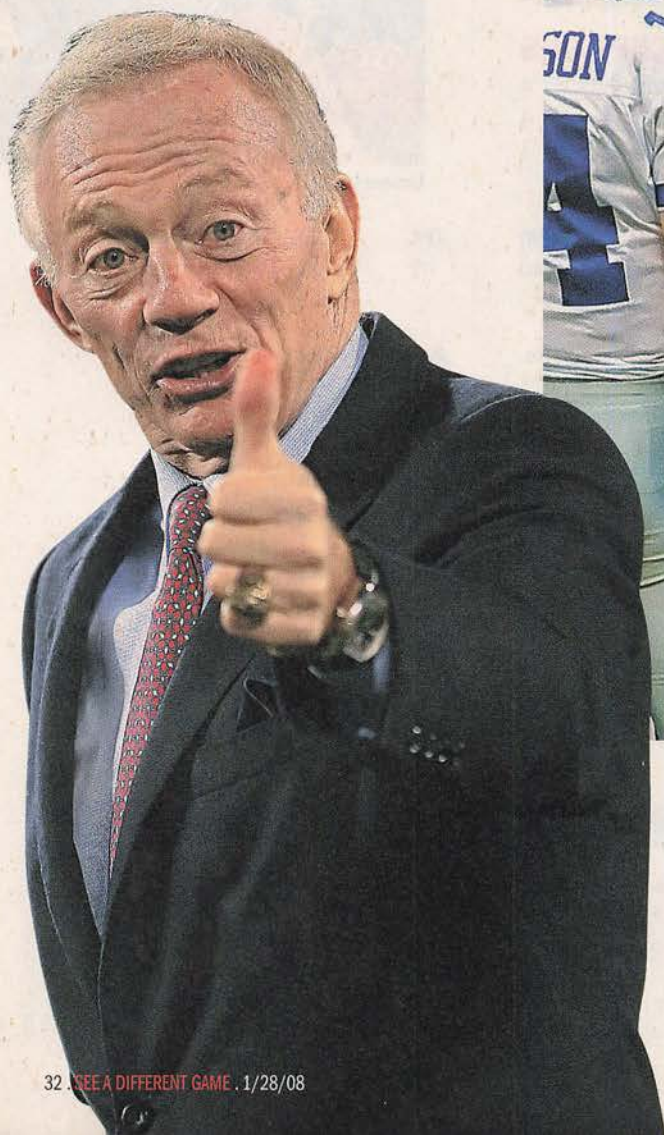
With their thunder-and-lightning rushing attack and Eli Manning playing his best football, the Giants have the firepower to hang with the Patriots for a while. To slow down New England, though, the Giants will need their defensive line to put hits on Tom Brady and get him off his game. But that won't happen against the Pats' excellent line, which will give Brady plenty of time to pick apart an improved—but still suspect—Giants secondary.

No, not Todd Jones. Jerry Jones—the owner who made sure Jason Garrett didn't get away.

Credit a save to Jones

By Clifton Brown

cliftonbrown@sportingnews.com



The Cowboys have already made their most important offseason move. They retained Jason Garrett.

More than being the Cowboys' assistant head coach, Garrett is their head coach-in-waiting. He is 41, bright, with terrific potential. That is why Cowboys owner Jerry Jones shrewdly plucked him from the Dolphins' coaching staff. That is why the Ravens wanted Garrett to become their head coach. That is why the Falcons were interested, too.

They saw what Jones saw. Even when Garrett was a backup quarterback in Dallas, teammates saw coaching potential. "Jerry Jones actually wanted to hire him as the offensive coordinator

my last season in 2000," says Troy Aikman, a FOX analyst who won three Super Bowls as the Cowboys' quarterback. "Jason would have been offensive coordinator/backup quarterback."

What Garrett did in his first year as a coordinator was impressive. The Cowboys were second in the league in points scored, third in total yards and fourth in passing yards.

Garrett's makeup also is impressive. He is confident and charismatic. He has an Ivy League education. If he had not become an OC, he might have been a CEO.

Keeping Garrett was vital for the Cowboys because coach Wade Phillips is on the hot seat. He is 60, is coming off a playoff flop and has an 0-4



Jones was determined that Garrett (above left) would stick around to help the Cowboys win big—either under Phillips (above right) or, eventually, without him.

Wade Phillips may win a playoff game one day, and he may even win a Super Bowl with the Cowboys. But he'd better hurry.

career postseason record.

Even if you like Phillips, those are the facts. Phillips is a nice guy and a proven defensive guru. He may win a playoff game one day, and he may even win a Super Bowl with the Cowboys.

But he'd better hurry. If the Cowboys miss the playoffs next season, do you think Jones will give Phillips another chance? I don't. If they pull another postseason one-and-done, do you think Phillips will keep his job? I don't.

Did you see the look on Jones' face on the sideline after the Cowboys lost to the Giants? If Jones has that same look after next season, somebody is going to pay.

If that someone is Phillips, Garrett will be right there with the Cowboys, not coaching the Ravens or Falcons. League rules forbid Jones from promising the top job to Garrett now, but so what? Jones can go through the formal interview process, then still make Garrett the head coach when the process ends.

After that, almost anything can happen. Who knew Bill Belichick would achieve greatness with the Patriots after he failed with the Browns? Who knew Mike McCarthy, an offensive coordinator with the Saints and 49ers, would turn the Packers into contenders in two years? Or that Mike Nolan, a successful defensive coordinator with the Ravens, would struggle with the 49ers?

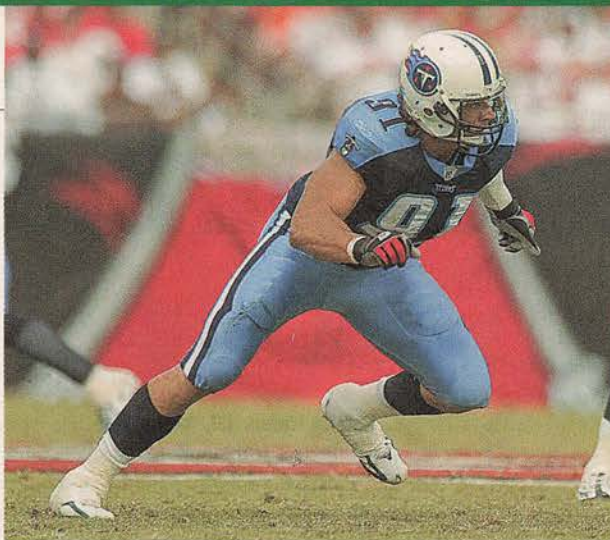
Garrett will have to prove himself all over again as a head coach, but this we already know: He is an excellent coordinator. He is respected by his players. And other teams already covet him.

"I would be disingenuous with you if I said at some point I didn't want to be a head coach in the National Football League," says Garrett. "I think it's natural for anybody who's coaching to want to progress."

At Garrett's age, there is no rush. He will gain experience next season while getting to know the Cowboys' personnel even better. That's great for Garrett, but what about Phillips? Will Garrett's presence make Phillips squirm if the Cowboys struggle early next season? Maybe, but if they're losing, Phillips will feel the heat no matter who is on his staff. And Garrett's return helps the Cowboys keep their offensive continuity, which in turn helps Phillips. "We're both all about team," says Garrett. "I'm really fortunate to work for Wade Phillips. He's really a special guy, and he's a special football coach."

The Ravens and Falcons felt the same way about Garrett. That is why Jones stepped up, promoted Garrett to assistant head coach and gave him more money than any assistant coach in the history of the league, reportedly close to the \$3 million a year Phillips is believed to be making. Already, Jones has made his most important offseason move. If Phillips fails, Jones has an alternative, ready and waiting.

SN



Keeping LaBoy (91) could be a problem for the Titans because they need cash to find some weapons for Young.

Firing offensive coordinator **Norm Chow** will not help the Titans' offense. Chow was made a scapegoat; the Titans struggled because QB **Vince Young** didn't make progress reading defenses and his average receivers struggled to get open. Finding better wideouts is a top offseason

priority, but the Titans also face major contract issues on the defensive line with T **Albert Haynesworth** and Es **Antwan Odom** and **Travis LaBoy** set to become free agents. Expect Tennessee to put a franchise tag on Haynesworth if they can't reach an agreement—even though that could force them to part with Odom or LaBoy because they need cap space to give Young the help he needs. ➤ The Bills should not trade **J.P. Losman** just because he wants out



speedreads

Now that the Dolphins have a coach, they need a quarterback. Tony Sparano will have a tough first year as coach unless they acquire a dependable QB.

The Ravens did not have to hire a coach who had never been a coordinator or a head coach. If John Harbaugh doesn't work out, general manager Ozzie Newsome will have some explaining to do.

Job candidates find it much easier to say no than yes to the Falcons. Bill Parcells, Bill Cowher, Pete Carroll, Jason Garrett and Jim Caldwell all decided Atlanta was not the place for them. That tells you something about how the organization is perceived.

Marvin Lewis keeps saying he will not trade Chad Johnson, but if Johnson wants out, the Bengals should oblige him. Johnson is a great player, but dealing him might be the first step in unifying the locker room.

of Buffalo. Losman is angry about losing his starting job to **Trent Edwards** while out with a sprained knee. However, Edwards did not set the league on fire, and he will be entering only his second season. Unless they get an offer they can't refuse, the Bills should give Losman one more shot to win the starting job—or even keep him as an experienced backup. ➤ LG **Alan Faneca** could help the Seahawks solve their running woes. The Steelers are not expected to re-sign Faneca, who is looking for a huge deal, and the Seahawks need him. Though RB **Shaun Alexander** has lost a step, Seattle's rushing attack has not been the same since LG **Steve Hutchinson** signed with

the Vikings two years ago. With Faneca and star LT **Walter Jones** playing side by side, the Seahawks' running game would improve regardless of whether Alexander stays. ➤ California junior WR **DeSean Jackson** was smart to enter the draft. The Bears (pick No. 14), Vikings (17), Eagles (19), Bucs (20) and Titans (24) are among many teams looking for a top wideout. Unless Jackson gets in trouble, gets injured or goes on a serious eating binge, there is no way he won't be a first-round pick.

➤ **Marvin Lewis'** job may depend on how well **Mike Zimmer** does his. Zimmer will be the third defensive coordinator in Lewis' six-year tenure as Bengals head coach. Lewis was lauded as a top defensive coordinator with both the Ravens and Redskins, but his defenses have been abused in Cincinnati. Over the past three seasons, when **Chuck Bresnahan** was the coordinator, the Bengals' defense never ranked better than 27th in yards allowed.



For more on Super Bowl 42, read Clifton Brown's column this week at sportingnews.com.

Rise and Shrine

After a week of practices and then a 31-13 West victory Saturday, War Room scouts sort out the movers and shakers at the East-West Shrine Game in Houston:

EAST players who helped themselves most

1. Jonathan Wilhite, CB, Auburn. He showed quicker feet, better tight coverage ability and a more explosive closing burst than expected. Wilhite was the best cornerback in Houston, a legit middle-round draft prospect.

2. Duane Brown, OT, Virginia Tech. He proved he is one of the more athletic tackles in the draft. Brown showed better consistency and competitiveness than he did during the season and could push himself into the second round.

3. Dexter Jackson, WR/KR, Appalachian State. His sharp routes, quick burst out of cuts and excellent hands helped him prove he could be a very good slot/third receiver who also makes plays as a returner.

4. Jerome Felton, FB/RB, Furman. He showed much quicker feet, better athleticism and playing speed than expected. Despite being raw, Felton has the ability to contribute as a ballcarrier, receiver and blocker.

5. Nick Hayden, DT, Wisconsin. A dominant week assured him of being drafted. Hayden will stick as a third or fourth tackle who consistently contributes.

... hurt themselves most

1. Anthony Morelli, QB, Penn State. Despite showing the arm to make all the throws, Morelli too often threw passes that fluttered and were off-target. Plus, he didn't read coverages consistently.

2. Keilen Dykes, DT, West Virginia. He lacked the explosiveness off the ball to shoot gaps and the quickness and pass-rush moves to defeat blocks.

3. Pedro Sosa, OT, Rutgers. He was beaten both around the corner and underneath by pass rushers, an indication he'll have to play guard in the NFL.

4. Bernard Morris, QB, Marshall. He flashed a strong arm but struggled when he didn't have a clean pocket from which to throw.

Robinson's two TDs, this one on a punt return, capped an attention-grabbing week of work.

WEST players who helped themselves most

1. Ahtyba Rubin, DT, Iowa State. He wowed scouts at the weigh-in, looking unusually muscular and in shape for a 321-pounder, and built on that as the week went on. Rubin showed the brute strength to control one-on-one blocks, plus he flashed good athleticism. He may have moved himself into the first round.

2. Joe Jon Finley, TE, Oklahoma. Not only was he surprisingly strong and muscular, he ran precise routes, showed more quickness out of cuts than expected and consistently made great catches. Don't be surprised if he's gone before Round 5.

3. Kevin Robinson, WR, Utah State. The star of the game, who scored TDs on a punt return and a reception, grabbed everyone's attention at Monday's practice and kept getting better. He doesn't have elite speed, but his sharp routes, intelligence and tremendous hands allowed him to stand out.

4. Marcus Henry, WR, Kansas. A smooth and fluid athlete who ran good routes and displayed a knack for getting open, Henry has excellent hands. Some were comparing him to Marcus Colston, saying he could go as high as the second round, but he looks more like a fourth- or fifth-rounder.

When East meets West, it's all about who climbs draft boards—and who falls

5. Justin Tryon, CB, Arizona State. He proved he is a very good athlete, showing the explosiveness, quickness, agility and speed of a starting cornerback. He will be considered in the fourth round.

... hurt themselves most

1. Zackary Bowman, CB, Nebraska. He has very quick feet, but he is not back to pre-knee injury form yet (and the question is whether he ever will be). Bowman was choppy in backpedals and struggled to change direction.

2. Tommy Blake, DE, TCU. Things started badly when he weighed in at 287 pounds—he played between 250 and 255 in 2006, his best season—and only got worse. He frequently looked out of shape and lacked intensity.

3. Dennis Keyes, S, UCLA. He looked stiff and played upright, which caused him to consistently allow separation, then he lacked the burst to get back into good coverage position.

4. Sam Keller, QB, Nebraska. Until he revamps his mechanics—the ball comes out almost shot-put-style—he will struggle to throw the ball accurately. **SN**

Get the latest draft analysis and rankings by subscribing to Pro Football War Room at sportingnews.com/nfl.





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SEE A DIFFERENT GAME

INSIDE THE AFC

Jones has all the tools but lacks the tricks of his trade

Jaguars WR Matt Jones is 6-6, has great speed and flashes brilliance. But he also is a tease because he lacks consistency and a mean streak. Jones is a nice red zone target because he can win jump balls, but he has to get better at using his body to shield defenders and learn how to gain separation with the subtle push-offs that many receivers his size often use.

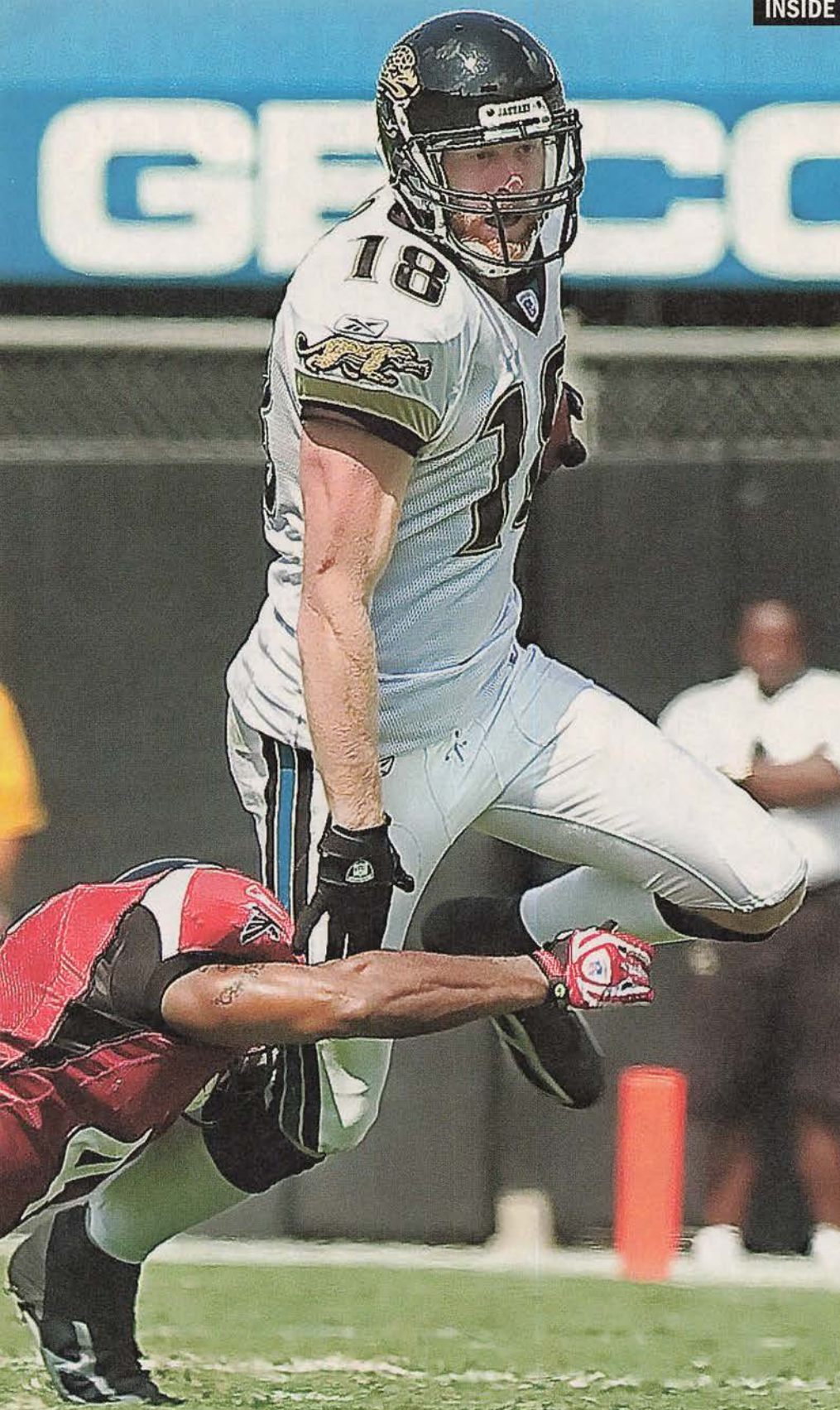
BALTIMORE New coach John Harbaugh has a solid pedigree and an energetic style. A longtime Eagles assistant, he likely will run the West Coast offense and emphasize the running game. Look for the defense to blitz often and revolve around an undersized but speedy linebackers unit that flies to the ball.

BUFFALO Turk Schonert was promoted from quarterbacks coach to offensive coordinator. He lacks experience calling plays, but coach Dick Jauron wanted to maintain continuity even though the offense struggled mightily. Schonert plans to develop schemes that get the most out of his playmakers. He will install an audible package to allow QB Trent Edwards more freedom.

CINCINNATI New defensive coordinator Mike Zimmer is vocal, intense and a stickler for detail. He is charged with turning a soft unit into one that is physical and aggressive. The club will stick with a 4-3 base, but Zimmer wants varied looks.

CLEVELAND Joshua Cribbs is the AFC's version of Devin Hester when it comes to returning kicks, but in order to contribute as a receiver, Cribbs needs to run more disciplined routes and improve his hands. He has good size (6-1, 215) and is a big-time threat in the open field. But there's concern that Cribbs' upright running style and lack of regard for his body will catch up to him.

DENVER RB Travis Henry could be released because of financial considerations, but coach Mike Shanahan also is intrigued by what Henry could do over an injury-free season. He will work with a personal trainer and focus on the short-area quickness drills that helped make him a 1,000-yard rusher in three different seasons.



Jones looks like a star at times, but those times are too infrequent for Jaguars fans.

TENNESSEE Offensive coordinator Norm Chow was replaced with Mike Heimerdinger, who held that role with the Titans from 2000-04. Heimerdinger has an in-your-face style and could clash with sometimes immature QB Vince Young. Heimerdinger is known for taking chances downfield and getting the most out of his players.

INSIDE THE NFC

The Cardinals want Leinart to grow up a little faster

Part of Cardinals coach Ken Whisenhunt's rationale for naming QB Matt Leinart his starter is he wants Leinart to accept more responsibility. In particular, the Cardinals would like Leinart to mature and be a leader veterans want to follow. Before his season-ending collarbone injury in Week 5, the staff had to emphasize the need for him to improve his mechanics and put in long hours of preparation.

ATLANTA Rookie Jason Snelling, a hybrid full-back/halfback, showed he can be a short-yardage option late in the season. He's a downhill runner who's a load when he reaches the second level. He needs to work on pass blocking.

CAROLINA CB Chris Gamble struggled with a dislocated thumb the final month, and his shaky tackling led the team to replace him as a starter with fast-rising Richard Marshall. Gamble is the team's most athletic corner, but he's the least effective against the run.

CHICAGO CB Nathan Vasher (groin) missed most of the season, but the team expects him to be ready for the offseason program. The Bears missed Vasher's ballhawking ability in 2007, when the team went for stretches without forcing many turnovers.

DALLAS The Cowboys need Roy Williams to regain his form from a couple of years ago, when he was considered a premier safety. He didn't deliver many game-changing hits this season, and opponents often isolated him to take advantage of coverage weaknesses.

DETROIT New coordinator Jim Colletto isn't committing to Jon Kitna as the starting quarterback. It looks like the Lions will give 2007 second-round pick Drew Stanton a chance to compete for the position in Colletto's simplified scheme, though Kitna, 35, is clearly the favorite.

GREEN BAY Next season, Daryn Colledge will face competition for the left guard job from Tony Palmer, Allen Barbre and Junius Coston. Colledge needs to be more decisive with his pickups, quicker out of his stance and better at finishing blocks.

MINNESOTA The team needs to find ways to boost the productivity of DT Kevin Williams, who finished with a career-low three sacks. NT Pat Williams is an excellent run stopper, but the Vikings must find a third-down pass-rush replacement for him to help free Kevin Williams from frequent double-teams.

NEW ORLEANS The Saints have decisions to make at receiver, where three of their top five are

free agents (David Patten, Devery Henderson and Terrance Cooper). Look for the team to focus first on re-signing Patten. If there's an odd man out, it likely will be Henderson.

NEW YORK TE Jeremy Shockey (fibula) needs to re-establish himself as a big-play threat in 2008. To do that, he must improve the reliability of his hands and be more precise in his route running. Too often this season, Shockey and QB Eli Manning were not on the same page.

PHILADELPHIA QB Donovan McNabb had solid numbers in 2007, but he connected on fewer throws downfield, held the ball too long and struggled in the red zone. McNabb needs to use the offseason to get more in sync with his receivers.

ST. LOUIS Expect the Rams to look for a center in free agency or the draft. Andy McCollum, 37, is a free agent and may retire. The team is interested in re-signing Brett Romberg, but he is undersized and was limited by an ankle injury.

SAN FRANCISCO Michael Robinson has developed into a solid all-around running back. As Frank Gore's backup, Robinson has improved at reading blocks and spotting the hole and hitting it decisively. He's also a capable receiver.

SEATTLE WR Deion Branch (ACL) isn't likely to return until at least midseason. Consequently, Courtney Taylor, a sixth-round pick in 2007, looms large in the wideout picture. The coaches like Taylor's size (6-1, 205), reliable hands and abil-

CORRESPONDENTS: Arizona, Kent Somers; Atlanta, D. Orlando Ledbetter; Carolina, Darin Gantt; Chicago, Brad Biggs; Dallas, Jean-Jacques Taylor; Detroit, Tom Kowalski; Green Bay, Tom Silverstein; Minnesota, Kevin Seifert; New Orleans, Mike Triplett; New York, Paul Schwartz; Philadelphia, Geoff Mosher; St. Louis, Jim Thomas; San Francisco, Dennis Georgatos; Seattle, Clare Farnsworth; Tampa Bay, Roy Cummings; Washington, Paul Woody.



If Leinart will spend a little more time in the film room, he might be able to avoid sacks like this one.

ity to shield defenders.

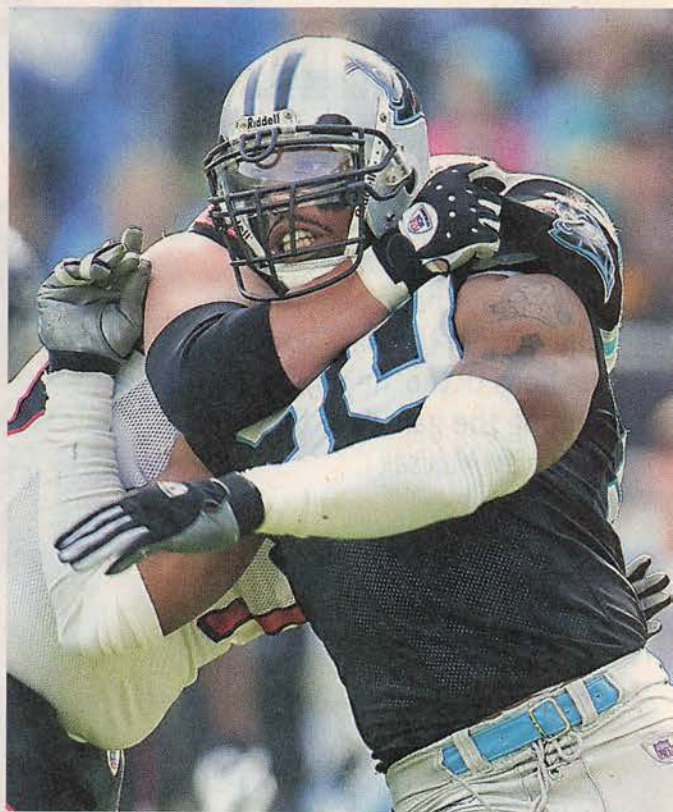
TAMPA BAY FB B.J. Askew isn't in the class of Mike Alstott, who is expected to retire, but Askew is a solid replacement. He is an exceptional blocker and a good receiver and, with his ability to break tackles, does a nice job of gaining yards after the catch.

WASHINGTON RB Ladell Betts, who was practically an afterthought in 2007, needs to be on the field more—if for no other reason than to lengthen the career of starter Clinton Portis. Betts hits the hole hard and has the speed to break off long runs.

FOCUS ON RESTORATION PROJECTS

Nothing is more important to the Panthers this offseason than finding the old **Julius Peppers**, who is coming off his worst season. Though he denied he was affected by a pair of training camp illnesses, he clearly wasn't as strong. He was muscled out of more plays than ever before and produced only 2½ sacks. Given that their defense is based on front four pressure, Peppers' dip was a big factor in the Panthers' struggles. His knee rehab—he sprained an MCL in December—only adds to his offseason work. ... Rams QB **Marc Bulger** went from a career year in 2006, which helped him land a \$65 million contract extension, to the worst season of his career. Offensive line problems contributed mightily to Bulger's decline, but he also fell into some bad habits. He forced throws into coverage, and his footwork and mechanics got worse. ... 49ers QB **Alex**

Smith regressed markedly during an injury-plagued season. He threw off-balance, failed to step up in the pocket and missed open receivers, though his lack of accuracy was



Peppers couldn't bust out in 2007 and needs to push himself—hard—in the offseason to get his edge back.

due in part to shoulder problems that caused him to alter his mechanics. Once he completes his rehab late in the spring, Smith will need to hone his footwork under new coordinator **Mike Martz**. ... Lions DT **Cory Redding**, who missed all of the offseason workouts last year after being named the team's franchise player, wasn't nearly the disruptive force he had been in 2006. He must get his full focus back on the field and regain his old hunger. ... There was a noticeable decline this season in the play of Falcons RG **Kynan Forney**, the key cog in a line that paved the way for RB **Warrick Dunn** and helped the Falcons lead the league in rushing from 2004 to 2006. Forney, 29, must rediscover his mean streak and rededicate himself to polishing the techniques that once made him a top lineman.

Offseason game plan

PACKERS This will be an offseason more of reaction than action. The club has about \$24 million in salary cap room and only one significant free agent—DT **Corey Williams**—but it's unlikely G.M. **Ted Thompson** will go on a spending spree. He doesn't need to accumulate draft choices as he has the past three years because he has a lot of young backups waiting for an opportunity. Thompson's best bet is to go for one big-name free agent like Seahawks CB **Marcus Trufant** or Bears OLB **Lance Briggs**. On offense, the club is strong at receiver but could use a young pass-catching tight end to complement **Donald Lee** and possibly replace **Bubba Franks**. The offensive line will remain a work in progress, and Thompson might add a veteran to back up **Chad Clifton** at left tackle. But it's not a high priority.



The Packers don't need to do a lot in the offseason—getting one big-name guy like Trufant would be enough.

Capital offense —and defense

Fun-loving and charismatic left winger Alexander Ovechkin has always been able to put the puck in the net. Now that he does D, too, he ranks among the game's elite.

By Corey Masisak

Anervous Nicklas Backstrom watched the group of reporters converge on him in the crowded visitors dressing room at Wachovia Center the day after Thanksgiving.

Backstrom had turned 20 that day and scored his second NHL goal, an overtime winner for his Capitals in a game against the Flyers. Concentrating on the pending interview and worried about his imperfect English, he did not see Alexander Ovechkin coming.

Ovechkin planted a shaving cream pie firmly in Backstrom's face, much to the delight of everyone in the room—except, of course, Backstrom.

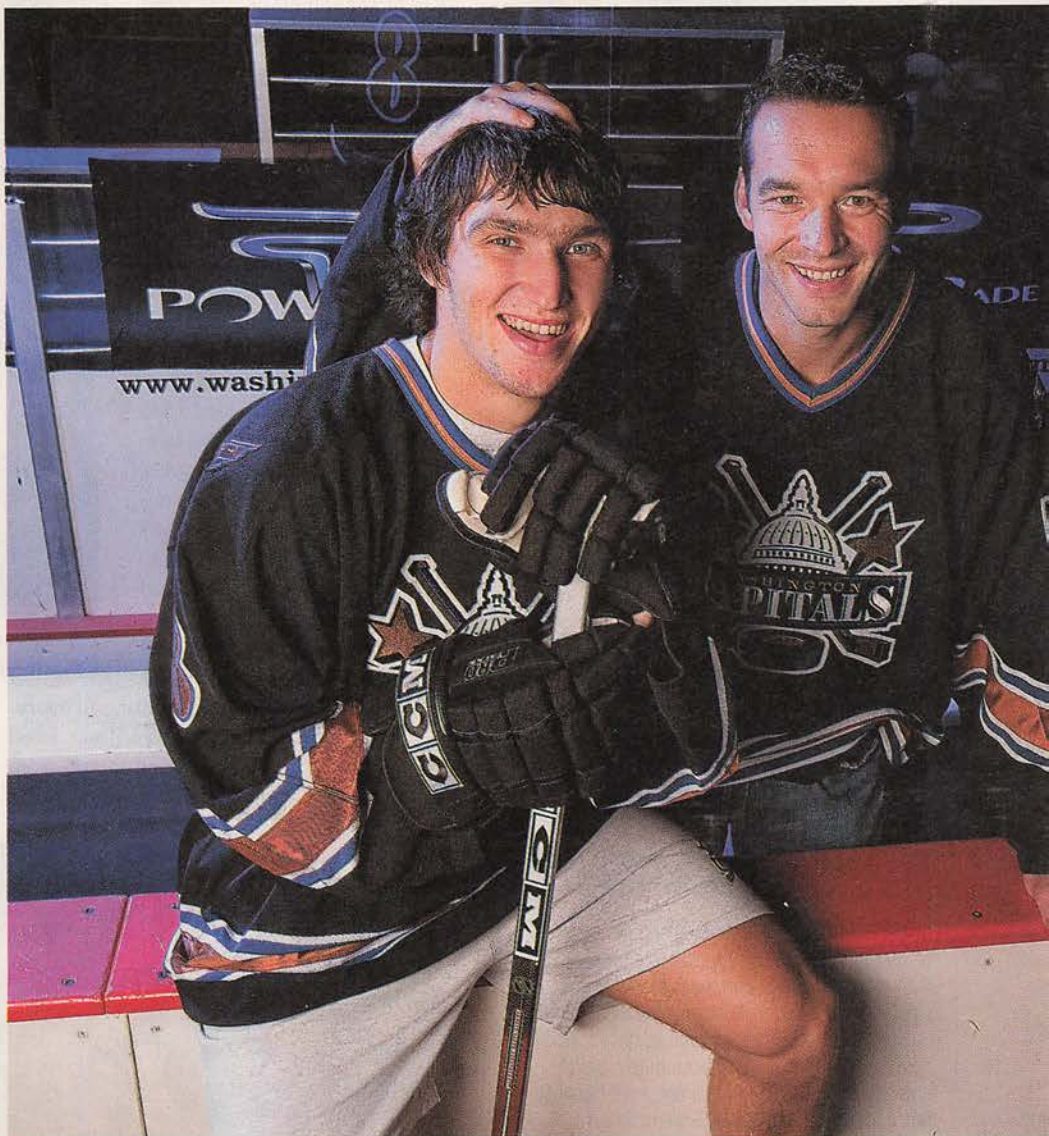
“(Ovechkin) is always high-strung. He’s always on the go,” Capitals defenseman Mike Green says. “The way he is on the ice is the way he is off the ice.”

Adds veteran goaltender Olie Kolzig: “There is nothing fake about it. He has been that way from Day 1.”

It's charisma and zeal for life that separate the explosive left winger from other young NHL stars. Few can match his sublime skill on the ice, and not many—maybe none—can boast his infectious personality away from it.

Ovechkin's on-ice evolution has continued in his third NHL season. He is on pace to surpass the team-record 52 goals and 106 points he scored as a rookie in 2005-06 and continues to jostle with Thrashers left winger and fellow Russian Ilya Kovalchuk for the league lead in postlockout goals (Ovechkin leads, 134-131). Plus, his all-around game has taken a big step forward.

Ovechkin, 22, is more mindful of defensive responsibilities. After finishing last season with a team-worst minus-19 rating, he leads the Capitals with a plus-8 this season. Ovechkin's defensive



Ovechkin (left) enjoys having fun with Kolzig and other teammates, but he saves his best shots for opposing goaltenders when the real games begin.

diligence has allowed coach Bruce Boudreau to trust his star with ice time during the final minutes of games in which the team is protecting a lead—something former coach Glen Hanlon couldn't do in Ovechkin's first two seasons.

Boudreau also is using Ovechkin on the point

during power plays. Having a penalty killer grab a turnover and break in with only Ovechkin between him and the goaltender might seem risky, but Ovechkin has developed his own brand of defense. Defensemen are trained to get sound position and let the penalty killer make the first move, but

Ovechkin becomes the aggressor, taking a direct path to the man with the puck and running him over. It's a risky strategy but so far a successful one.

"I have to (hit people). That is my style," Ovechkin says. "If I can hit people, then why not?"

Ovechkin's combination of goal-scoring ability, zest for hitting and natural flair have made him one of the league's most popular players. His on-his-back, one-handed, how-did-he-do-that goal against the Coyotes in his rookie season became an Internet phenomenon.

Twice he has caused damage to the glass with bone-rattling checks, including once in a game against Columbus—on his first NHL shift.

"I haven't seen anyone that he reminds me of, but from people I talk to he is sort of a modern-day Gordie Howe/Rocket Richard-type player," Washington general manager George McPhee says. "(Hall of Famer) Cliff Fletcher tells me he reminds him of the Rocket—he sees it in his eyes, the intensity and desire to score. (Hurricanes owner) Pete Karmanos, who used to watch Gordie Howe play all the time, says Ovechkin has the goal-scoring ability and the physicality that Gordie Howe had."

Ovechkin's special talents and willingness to become the face of the franchise prompted McPhee and owner Ted Leonsis to give their young star a market-altering 13-year, \$124 million contract extension on January 10.

After firing agent Don Meehan in November 2006, Ovechkin negotiated the deal himself—with help from his parents. Ending speculation that he wanted to play in a more prestigious hockey community, Ovechkin will not be back on the market until after the 2020-21 season.

"Alex is a world-class talent, but he is also a really great person," Leonsis says. "My bet is that the money won't affect him and he'll play every shift like it is the seventh game of the finals of the Stanley Cup. That is what we love about him."

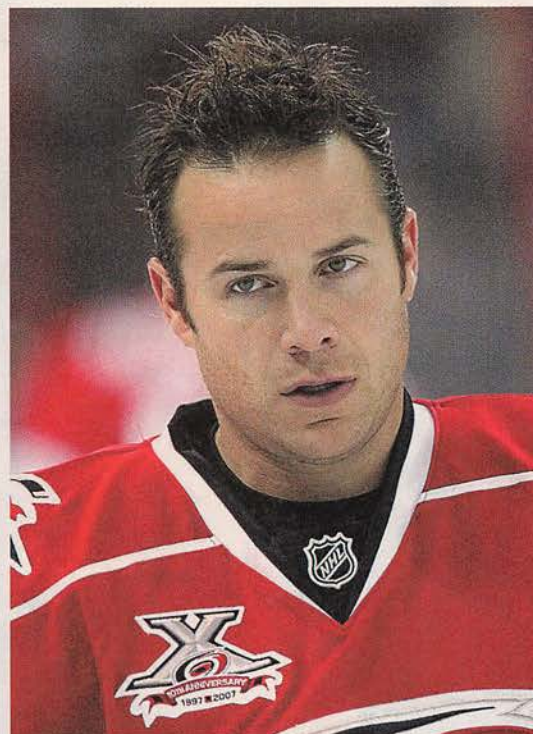
As for what to do with the extra money, Ovechkin jokes, "I already have everything." But his teammates are willing to help him find ways to spend some of it.

"We were hoping to get a dinner out of it," Green says. "He says he is broke right now, but I hardly believe that." **SN**

INSIDE DISH

It's easy to attribute the Blackhawks' resurgence to the rise of young RW **Patrick Kane** and Cs **Jonathan Toews** and **Patrick Sharp**. But that's only part of the reason. Since the death of longtime Hawks president **William Wirtz** in September, son **Rocky Wirtz** has made several bold moves, including setting up an unprecedented free home television package for the fans and hiring **John McDonough** as president. This is a franchise that had disconnected from its past, and one of McDonough's first moves was to end the longstanding feud between the team and many of its former

players, including Hall of Famers **Bobby Hull** and **Stan Mikita**, both of whom McDonough hired as official club ambassadors. "We're no longer ostracized the way we have been for the last 28 years," Mikita says. The overall atmosphere at the United Center has improved dramatically, both on the ice and off, and fans are filling the seats. ➤ The Hurricanes have controlled the Southeast Division for the entire season, but they could be in trouble if they don't get healthy—fast. Injuries are only part of the problem. The Hurricanes' roster has been crippled by a nasty virus that seems to claim a new victim or two every day. D **Niclas Wallin** missed last Tuesday's game at Toronto; LW **Ray Whitney**, RW **Trevor Letowski** and Ds **Wade Brookbank** and **Glen Wesley** missed the previous game against the Avalanche. Whitney and Wesley,



Like many of his teammates, Whitney is sick and tired of the virus that has calmed the Hurricanes.

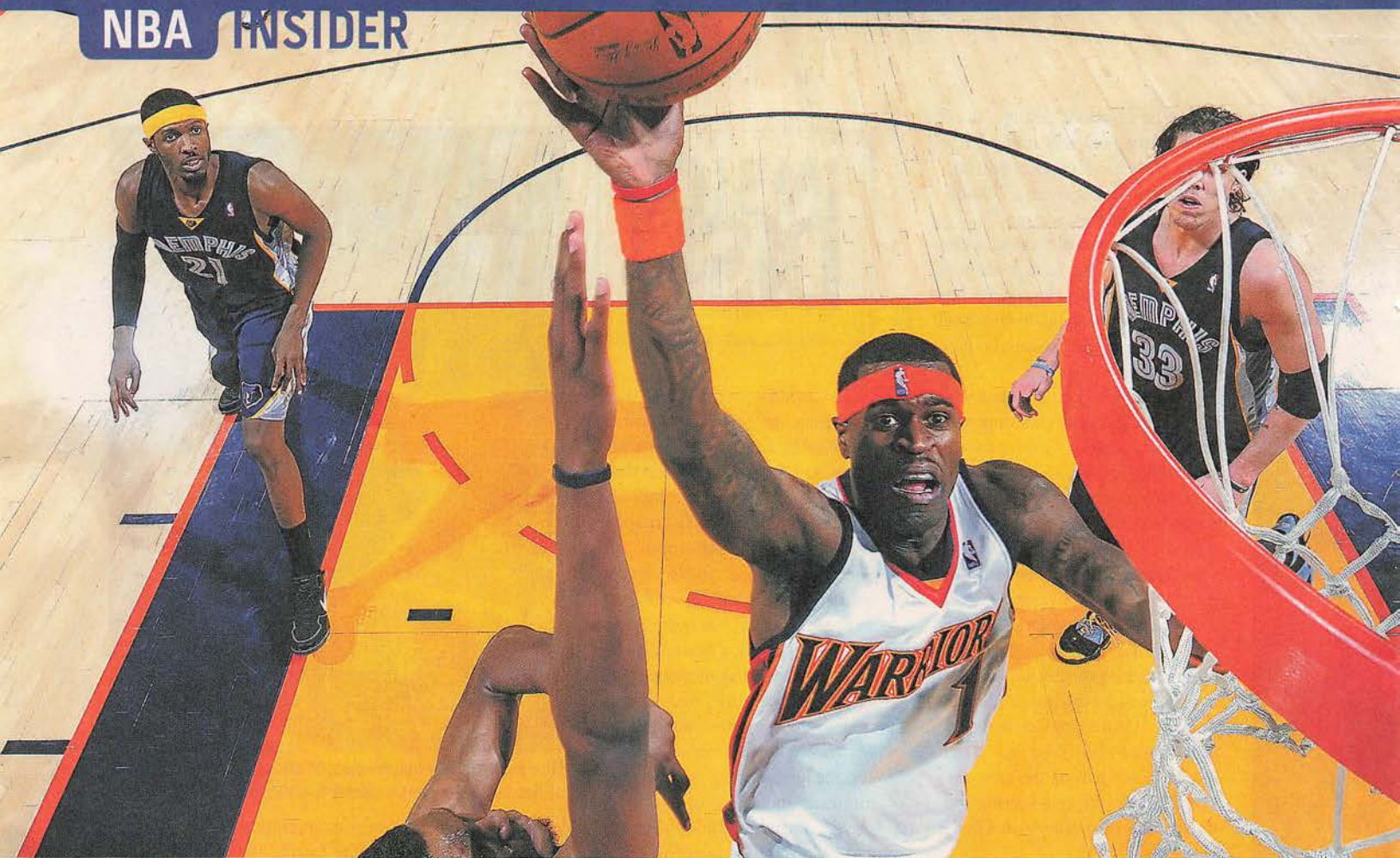
who said only seven players had avoided the bug, were sitting for the third straight game. "This is not your typical sniffles," coach **Peter Laviolette** says. "These are tough guys who can play through just about anything, and they're down and out." Carolina entered the week 3-7-1 in its last 11 games and is sinking fast in the standings. Second place might not cut it in the playoff chase; all five division teams are struggling to stay at .500, so the Hurricanes may have to win the Southeast to secure a playoff spot. ➤ Things are so bad in Toronto that fans at Air Canada Centre chanted, "Fire Ferguson! Fire Ferguson!" throughout the third period of a game the Maple Leafs were leading—and eventually won over the Hurricanes—last week. G.M. **John Ferguson's** team was 2-9-2 in the 13 games leading up to that win.

speedreads

An All-Star Game without Sidney Crosby, who suffered a high ankle sprain last week, would be like a golf major without Tiger Woods. But the streaking Penguins catch a break: They play only three games in 11 days because of the All-Star hiatus.

The Canucks will make the playoffs and maybe even win the tough Northwest Division. But their 0-15-1 record when trailing after two periods suggests a lack of mental toughness that will derail them in the postseason. —Ron Smith

S The Sharks, Ducks and Stars are battling for supremacy in the rugged Pacific Division. Follow that race and watch the playoff lineup take shape at sportingnews.com.



Stephen Jackson has had his share of ups and downs, but since his arrival the Warriors haven't gone anywhere but up.

It's no wonder Stevie is thriving

By Stan McNeal

smcneal@sportingnews.com

Call him Captain Jack. Super glue. Stevie. Or Mr. "Should Be an All-Star."

Just don't call Stephen Jackson a poster boy for all that's wrong with the NBA. He knows he has had his issues, most notably on that night in 2004 when he followed Ron Artest into the stands in Detroit and an early morning in October '06 when he fired a gun into the air outside of an Indianapolis nightclub. He will tell you he merely was protecting teammates both times. He also will tell you he "manned up" and took responsibility for both incidents, and 100 hours of community service in Indiana and 10 more days in Michigan last summer prove that.

Prod a bit and Jackson will tell you how he plans to spend his summer. He'll be in his hometown preparing for the expansion of the Stephen Jackson Academy, a private school Jackson and his mom founded after Hurricane Rita left Port Arthur, Texas, short on schools. The academy is

expecting 500 students when the new campus opens.

Jackson will let someone else tell you about his role in the Warriors' community service program. When a school district was looking for a player to read to students last year, the team sent Jackson. Concerned about Jackson's reputation, the district asked for someone else, but the team said no. He turned out to be such a hit the district called later asking for photos of Jackson to use in promotional material.

But for many, especially those in Indianapolis, all of Jackson's good deeds won't make up for his role in forming the dark cloud that still hovers over the Pacers. After the nightclub incident, which resulted in a felony charge of criminal recklessness, Jackson regularly was booed at home. "They had to blame somebody. Ron Artest wasn't there," he says.

Jackson eventually was booed all the way to California when the Pacers sent him to the Warriors in an eight-player trade of mostly misfits. On

the first anniversary of the deal, Jackson and I are lunching in Chicago, talking about the past year. He wasn't looking to be traded but figured a deal was inevitable—the Pacers weren't winning and the fans were staying away. "Somebody had to go," he says. "For me, it really was a blessing in disguise."

The Warriors certainly can say the same. Besides working hard to improve his image, Jackson has thrived on the floor. Last season, he helped the Warriors end a 12-season playoff drought and then led their upset over the top-seeded Mavericks in the first round. This season, he is averaging a career-best 20.3 points to go with 4.2 assists and 4.5 rebounds. More important, he has become the Warriors' leader—coach Don Nelson named him a captain before the season—and the guy who brings the energy needed to make the team's breakneck approach go.

One stat shows his worth: 0-6, the Warriors' record to start the season as Jackson served a suspension for the criminal recklessness plea (during

which he volunteered for more community service in Oakland). Since his return, the Warriors have gone 24-11 and established themselves as playoff contenders.

Maybe it's time to start calling Jackson something else: Stevie Wonder. **SN**

From the mouth of Captain Jack

On being named team captain: "I was in New York last summer when (coach Don Nelson) called. We were shooting the B.S. when he asked, 'How would you like to be captain?' At first, I'm like, 'Captain of what?' I told him I would love to. That's a big honor. I put that right there with winning a championship."

On defending Dirk Nowitzki, a key to upsetting the Mavericks in last season's playoffs: "He kept trying to drive around me, but I wouldn't let him. This season, he has just backed me down and shot over me. He dropped 35 (actually 29) on me. Next time, I will try to steal the ball as soon as he dribbles, trying to make him pick it up before he backs me down. That's why they sometimes call the NBA 'Nothing But Adjustments.'"

On whom he compares himself to: "The Grant Hill of old and Scottie Pippen. About the only one I see out there now—and we have different styles—is Ron Artest. He plays defense and can score, but he is big and will beat you up in the post. He's beaten me up down there before."

S Did the fans make the right call? Find out what Stan McNeal thinks at sportingnews.com when the All-Star lineups are unveiled Thursday.

speedreads

Whenever someone has to assure us he's in charge—as Bulls interim coach Jim Boylan did last week—I immediately think, "Uh-oh, he's not in charge."

As a fellow Polk County (Fla.) native, I always have been a Tracy McGrady fan. But his lack of urgency in returning to the Rockets makes me wonder: How much does this guy want to play?

Another example of the fanatic Boston sports fan: Kevin Garnett's jersey did not even make the lengthy list of best-sellers a year ago. Now it's No. 1.

PG **Rajon Rondo's** back problems have taken a toll on the Celtics' offense. With Rondo at full speed, Boston typically started a play with about 17 seconds left on the 24-second clock. With Rondo either out or hindered by his back, the Celtics often don't get into a play until there's just 12 seconds left. The result is an offense that averaged 92.8 points in its first nine January games after averaging 98.8 in December. **>** The Spurs' recent 9-9 run of mediocrity also can be attributed to offensive woes, namely a lack of ball movement that has resulted in too many rushed shots.

In October and November, they shot 48.3 percent and averaged 101.6 points per game. Since then, they're shooting 46.3 percent and averaging 93.7 points.

> Pacers PF **Jermaine O'Neal**, 29, has told friends he would welcome a fresh start in an offense that better suits him. O'Neal still is slowed at times by his surgically repaired left knee, which will make his max contract more difficult to move. **>** In the Lakers' first game without C **Andrew Bynum** (knee), SG **Kobe Bryant** put up 44 shots and was criticized by coach **Phil Jackson** even though L.A. beat the Sonics. In their next game, Bryant took half as many shots and the Lakers lost to the Suns, ending a seven-game winning streak. **>** Timberwolves rookie SF **Corey Brewer's** minutes have been cut almost in half in January, making at least one scout wonder whether he was the right pick at No. 7. The scout has been disappointed in Brewer's athleticism and energy level: "I don't see him being anything more than a role player," he says. Bucks rookie PF **Yi Jianlian**, meanwhile, has impressed the same scout. "He's

highly skilled and very agile for his size," he says of the 7-footer, who has started every game. "He's got to improve his low-post game, but I think he's going to be pretty good in this league. They need to get him more involved than they have so far." **>** If the 76ers decide not to trade **Andre Miller**, there's still no shortage of available point guards. **Mike Bibby** is looking good in his return from left thumb surgery and figures to be traded by the Kings, and **Damon Stoudamire** is waiting for the Grizzlies to make a deal or buy him out.

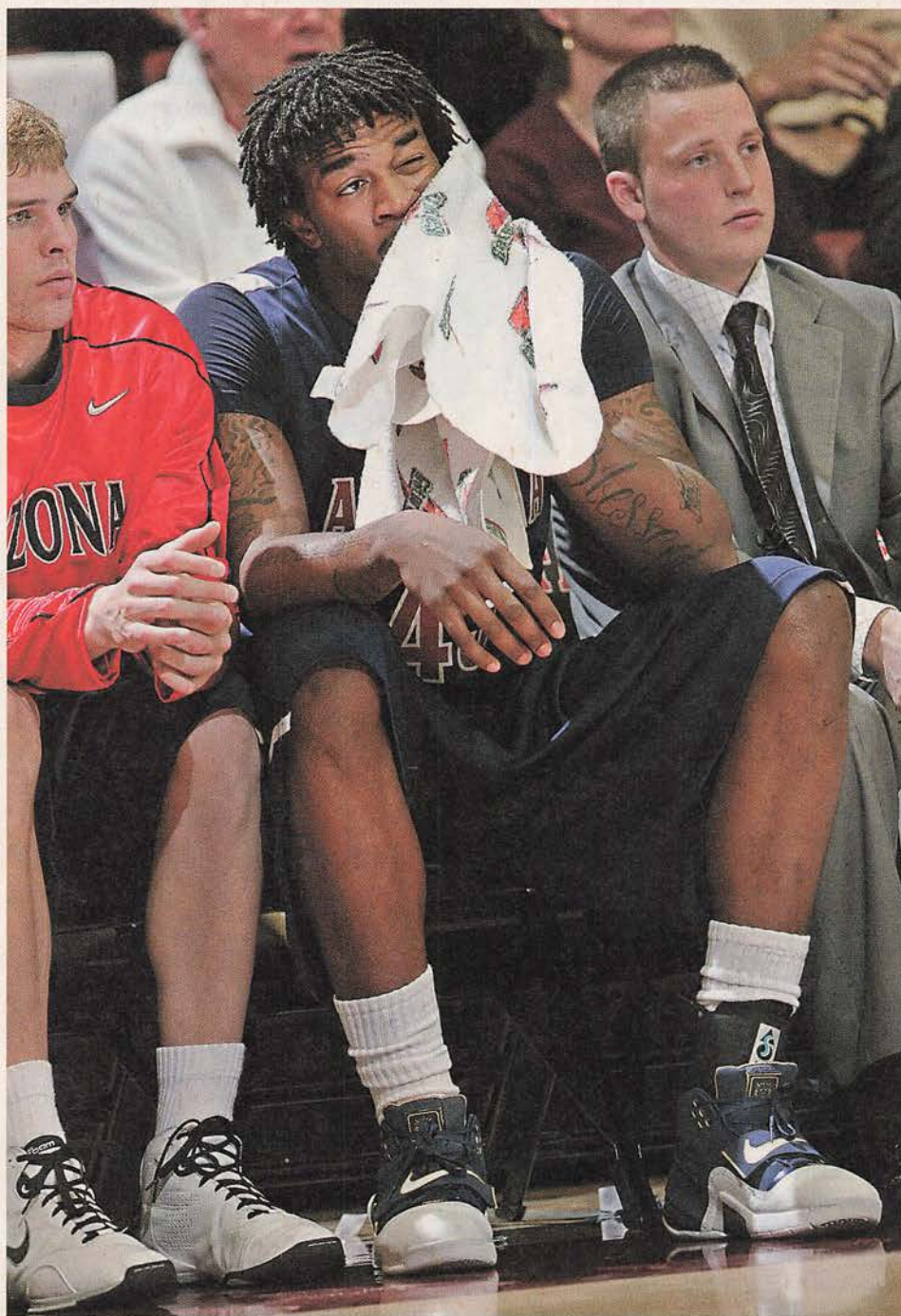
> INSIDE DISH



O'Neal would like to see how he looks in a color other than blue.

Think winning on the road is tough?
Try doing it twice in three days—on multiple occasions.

You don't need a GPS to find trouble in the Pac-10



After the sting of the loss to Stanford, Hill and the Wildcats were on the road again.

By Mike DeCourcy

decourcy@sportingnews.com

The sun shines most of the time on the Pac-10 Conference, but this is where the road is toughest. The crowds are larger in the Big Ten. The basketball is rougher in the Big East. The passion is greater in the ACC. The weather is nastier in the Big 12. But the Pac-10 is where they always hand out away games in double doses.

If you're at Stanford on Thursday night, you're at Cal on Saturday afternoon. That's how it works in this league. And anticipating the second sting from that paddle is so much worse because you remember how the first blow hurt.

"It's real hard," says Arizona center Jordan Hill. "You've got a game you just played, and then you've got to play another one that's a hard matchup. You'll probably be tired. You just have to stay focused."

Of the big-money conferences, only the Pac-10 does it this way. Each team is assigned a natural travel partner—Arizona gets Arizona State, Washington has Washington State, etc.—and almost all games are played in a Thursday/Saturday package. It provides a nice rhythm to the conference season, though it is tough to manage.

But even if a road trip hurts worse when it includes two I's instead of one, the road is as brutal as it has ever been all over college basketball. The more balance in a particular conference, the more fiercely teams believe they must protect their home courts if they are to win any games at all.

In the first few weeks of Big East competition, visiting teams were 9-33 and seven of the league's 16 members did not have a road win.

In the Big 12, 10 league members lost their first league road games. Only Kansas and Kansas State won their road openers.

In the six BCS conferences, road teams own a 48-106 record, a dismal .312 percentage. Few victories were against quality opponents; most came against teams like Northwestern, Oregon State and Rutgers.

The number of freshmen now playing vital roles at the highest levels might be the cause of this epidemic. Television analysts like to repeat the theory that playing in big-time high school tour-

naments and AAU events better prepares today's rooks for the challenge of Division I, but nothing can prepare them for life on the road: the travel, the hostile crowds, the unfriendly rims.

Arizona had exactly 42 hours, 58 minutes from the time it finished a tough, close loss to Stanford until the next game tipped off at Cal's Haas Pavilion. The travel wasn't bad, at least in terms of mileage, though you never know about traffic crossing the Bay. But both arenas feature enthusiastic spectators stacked directly on top of the courts, and both teams feature powerful, skilled frontcourts. That's a lot to handle for a team with one proven big man, Hill, a 6-9 sophomore.

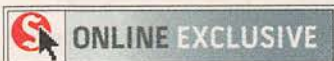
The northern California trip is one every Pac-10 team will be required to make, so most of the time, things even out. But not always. Like Washington a year ago, this season's freshman-dominated USC team is particularly burdened by the design of its conference schedule. The Trojans opened with the two-game trip to northern California, returned home for Washington State and Washington, followed that with a cross-town visit to UCLA and now face a pair of games at Oregon and Oregon State.

A road trip hurts worse when it includes two L's instead of one.

That's five of the first seven on the road, the same numbers UW faced last season. A young team that lets a few get away—as UW certainly did—can learn a lot about how to lose. After opening 1-6, the talented Huskies weren't able to recover to reach even the NIT. When the Trojans began this year's sojourn, they were thinking a 3-4 start would be brilliant.

Arizona is not exactly a veteran group, either. Hill, point guard Nic Wise and star forward Chase Budinger are sophomores. Shooting guard Jerryd Bayless, the leading scorer, is a freshman. After opening with two games at home, the Wildcats were stuck playing their next three on the road—and were happy to close that stretch with a victory at Cal.

Maybe that's why Arizona interim coach Kevin O'Neill was unimpressed. He has seen worse. "I was in the NBA, where you played four in five nights," he says. "I'd rather play more games, if we could. This doesn't bother me at all." **SN**



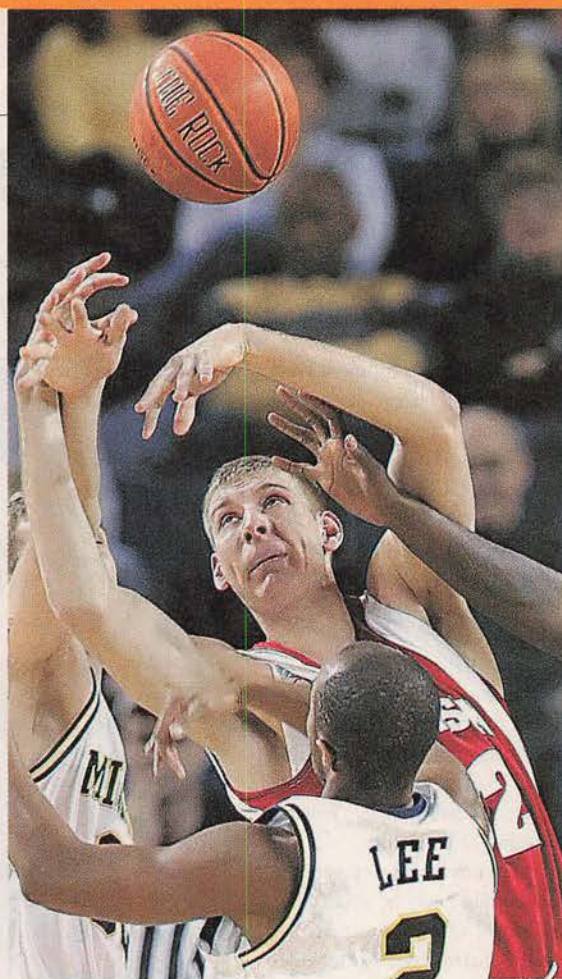
Surely you've noticed the rise of the Atlantic 10. Mike DeCourcy puts his spin on the showdown between Dayton and Xavier at sportingnews.com.



The season's-end retirement of South Carolina coach **Dave Odom** will create a vacancy for which there will be no shortage of intriguing candidates. **Gregg Marshall** did fabulous work at Winthrop and has strong support in the state, but he's in just his first year at Wichita State.

Dave Dickerson, a native of the state, has done an amazing job keeping Tulane competitive in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, though it largely has gone unnoticed because the Green Wave play in Conference USA. Western Kentucky's **Darrin Horn** has been a consistent winner, and he plays an entertaining style. ➤ Pepperdine officials were blindsided when coach **Vance Walberg** resigned, but he had been wrestling with the decision for weeks. He was attempting to install his wide-open offense and was in only his second season of rebuilding. But, after years of success in high school and junior college, Walberg struggled to stomach the constant taste of defeat. The next coach will be the Waves' fourth since the start of the decade. ➤ Maybe it was smart, after all, for Wisconsin C **Brian Butch** to redshirt as a freshman. It seemed curious for a McDonald's All American to voluntarily check out of a potential national championship run, which is what the Badgers had in mind for the 2003-04 season. However, Butch is making excellent use of the extra year he gained. It showed when he improved from one of the weakest runners in

the Badgers' infamous hill climb conditioning exercise to, this year, one of the leaders among the bigs. Being in better shape is helping Butch reach double figures in rebounding more often, and he brings a varied set of skills to the offense. ➤ For coach **Matt Painter**, managing Purdue's promising start in the Big Ten might be a greater challenge than steering the young Boilermakers through a frustrating December. He says he needs to stress not celebrating a big victory too long: "It's human nature when you get beat to bounce back. Now, when you have success it feels good. Your back hurts from everybody telling you how great you are. I have to make sure they understand this is a grind."



Butch is rebounding better because he's in better shape.

speedreads

There's no reason to get all weepy about Texas Tech coach Bob Knight getting victory No. 900. He already has the Division I record for most wins, and this is just another round number. But the victory was special: The Raiders easily took apart a top-caliber Texas A&M team.

Two reasons it was surprising Mississippi State's Jarvis Varnado recorded a triple double against Kentucky: 1) A 39 percent free throw shooter, he had to make four from the line to get his 10 points; and 2) you wouldn't expect the Wildcats to keep challenging him with shot attempts—he blocked 10.

That Vanderbilt lost its first two SEC road games is no reason to panic. That 6-11 freshman center A.J. Ogilvy got only 10 rebounds in the two games—combined—is cause for concern. Tennessee's Wayne Chism, so allergic to glass he hadn't had a double-figure rebound game all season, beat Ogilvy and his mates for 18 boards.

Until they meet again

USC and O.J. Mayo scored a huge upset against UCLA and Kevin Love. Round 2 is February 17. *By Mike DeCourcy*

This was the moment West Coast college basketball fans waited for ever since Kevin Love signed to play for UCLA and O.J. Mayo joined up at Southern California. It happened on the floor at Pauley Pavilion. The two shook hands and Love said, "Good game."

That's all there was to it.

The anticipated meeting between the two famous, fabulous freshmen amounted to little more than a postgame handshake following the Trojans' stunning 72-63 victory.

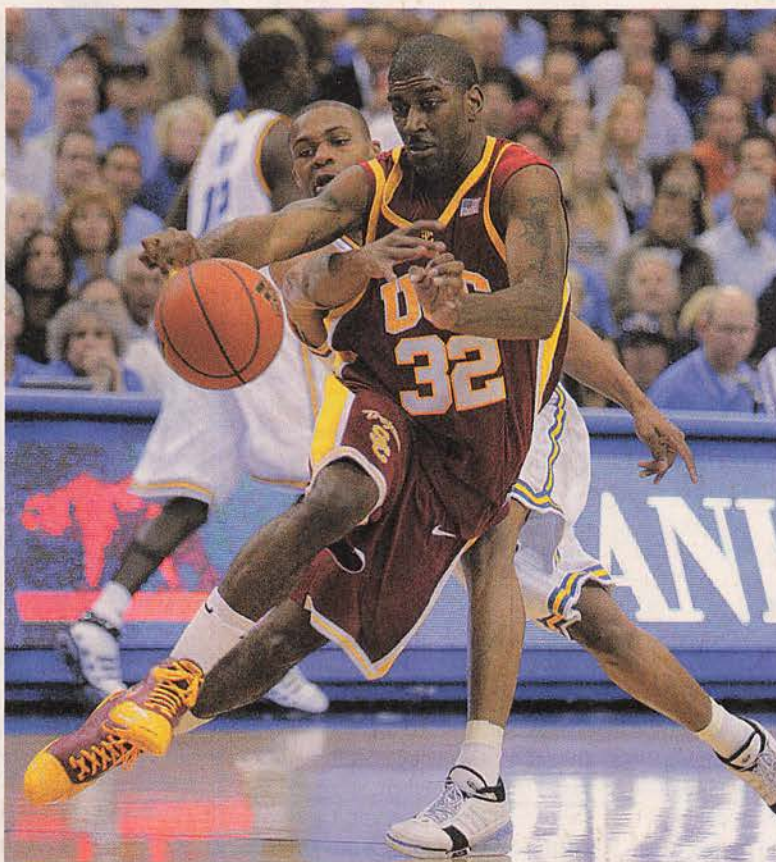
There never was any way the game could really be about Love vs. Mayo. One is a center, the other a guard. Love is the wide-shouldered, low-post monster from Oregon who passes like he's possessed by Bill Walton. Mayo is the West Virginia backcourt prodigy who starred in high school ball as a seventh grader and became a summer-circuit legend with his swashbuckling long-range jumper.

It's like trying to conjure a rivalry between the Boston Red Sox and the New York Giants.

During the course of the game, their paths intersected twice, for a total of about 8 seconds. With 14:09 left, Mayo popped open in the left corner when the Bruins' Russell Westbrook slid up the sideline to attempt a trap on the ball. Love was the only player in position to dash down the baseline and challenge Mayo but couldn't get there quickly enough to deny a sizzling 3-point shot.

With 8:10 remaining, Love broke loose from his defensive assignment when he saw Mayo had picked up his dribble in the right corner. Love and Westbrook squeezed Mayo as if he were a packet of ketchup, and Love stripped the ball from Mayo's hands.

That made the personal score even, but Mayo broke



Mayo (32) showed better shot selection in USC's win. Love (42) got good shots but didn't make enough of them.

the tie when USC secured a victory that could rescue its season. The Trojans now have a signature win that could separate them from others likely to flirt with the NCAA Tournament bubble.

USC won by executing its game plan almost flawlessly—a strategy that called for Mayo to shoot less carelessly than in many previous games. He entered as perhaps the most maligned 44 percent shooter in college basketball, and it was important he be selective about the nature of his attempts against the Bruins.

The Trojans now have a signature win that could separate them from others likely to flirt with the NCAA Tournament bubble.



"He was very patient. That's part of the reason they won," Love said. "A lot of people have been giving him a lot of grief for taking a lot of shots."

Mayo wound up attempting nearly five shots under his average, but he drew praise for his 16-point, 4-assist effort. He attempted just one audacious, "O.J. only" shot, a 25-footer from the top of the key midway through the second half. Given that he'd been so careful to launch only textbook, open shots, it was curious to see him regress briefly, but obviously.

"I felt like I could make it," Mayo said, smiling wide. "Every shot I take, I feel like I can make it."

Love was standing a lot closer to the goal for a surprising number of his misses. He entered the game shooting 60.3 percent but was off on nine shots, many from directly beneath the basket. He appeared to be bothered by the length of USC's 6-9 Taj Gibson. Love still managed a double double with 18 points and 12 rebounds and showed his versatility by nailing a 3-pointer that gave the Bruins a 6-point lead with 7:21 left. But it was far from his most polished performance.

Love perceived a lack of passion in the Bruins' body language. Several in the UCLA program suggested the opposite, that the Bruins might have been too emotional, but Love insisted something was missing: "We've got to come out with a lot more fire."

Last Saturday's game was the third the Trojans played against an elite team; they earlier lost to Kansas by four and to Memphis by the same margin in overtime. In those games, Mayo attempted a combined 41 shots. He made just 12. He doesn't need to completely abandon his aggressive approach, but it doesn't hurt to play smart.

"I know everyone focuses their attention on me, but we've got a good team," Mayo said. "We can be a better team together instead of just as individuals. Our whole focus was staying together, playing together, and we could give us a chance to win."

"It's not a one-on-one game. It's five-on-five." **SN**

Dodge has been in transition for years, and its checkered past does not indicate the finish line is near.

A long road to success

By Bob Pockrass

Toyota has big expectations for its second year of Cup racing, but the other manufacturer that joined the series this decade is still in transition.

Seven years ago, Dodge resurrected its Cup program, and Chip Ganassi Racing was strong out of the box. Sterling Marlin finished third in points in his first season and followed that by contending for a title before a neck injury ended his 2002 season.

Since then, the best Dodge finish has been Ryan Newman's sixth-place runs in 2003 and '05.

Coming off a year in which Dodge won only three of 36 races, nobody can make a case that a title run is imminent.

Newman missed the Chase the past two seasons, so it's hard to consider the Penske team a threat. His teammate, Kurt Busch, won a title at Roush Racing and is the most serious contender, but he won just twice last year as the only Dodge driver to qualify for the Chase.

Most of the Dodge teams are in transition. Penske will have to adjust to the retirement of president Don Miller while adding a third team—with Indycar driver Sam Hornish.

At Ganassi, Reed Sorenson, who will turn 22 next month, is the team "veteran" with two full years of Cup experience. Juan Pablo Montoya was solid in his first season but might be another year away from challenging for the Chase. And Dario Franchitti, the defending IRL champion, faces a daunting learning curve.

Ray Evernham, the guy who spearheaded Dodge's re-entry into Cup racing, has scaled back his role since selling his team to the George Gillett family. He won't be at the track every week, and Gillett Evernham Motorsports is trying to rebound from an underwhelming 2007. As much as that organization—headlined by Kasey Kahne—has struggled with the Car of Tomorrow, two or three wins would be a big improvement under new leadership.

The other Dodge team, Petty Enterprises, has moved into a temporary shop in the NASCAR hub with the hope of

building on Bobby Labonte's 18th-place points finish. Just winning a race would be great for Labonte and new crew chief Jeff Meendering, who worked previously on Jeff Gordon's team.

The biggest change at Dodge might come from above. New Chrysler CEO Bob Nardelli (former CEO of The Home Depot and head cheerleader for Tony Stewart) wants his Dodge teams to win—and win now. It's a refreshing new course with Nardelli in charge. There's a sense of urgency.

But Nardelli would be smart to expect improvement while understanding that his teams are in transition. They're setting themselves up to be stronger down the road.

SN

Bob Pockrass is an associate editor for NASCAR Scene. Read more from Pockrass at scenedaily.com.

speedreads

Last season, only three drivers had more top five finishes than Denny Hamlin. Though his move to Toyota creates some uncertainty, it's still safe to say he will finish significantly higher than his 12th-place Chase rank in 2007.

Kevin Harvick has long been the big dog at Richard Childress Racing, but he had better watch out for Clint Bowyer, who passed him in the standings last season with a strong finish. Don't be surprised if Bowyer finishes on top again in 2008.

—Roger Kuznia



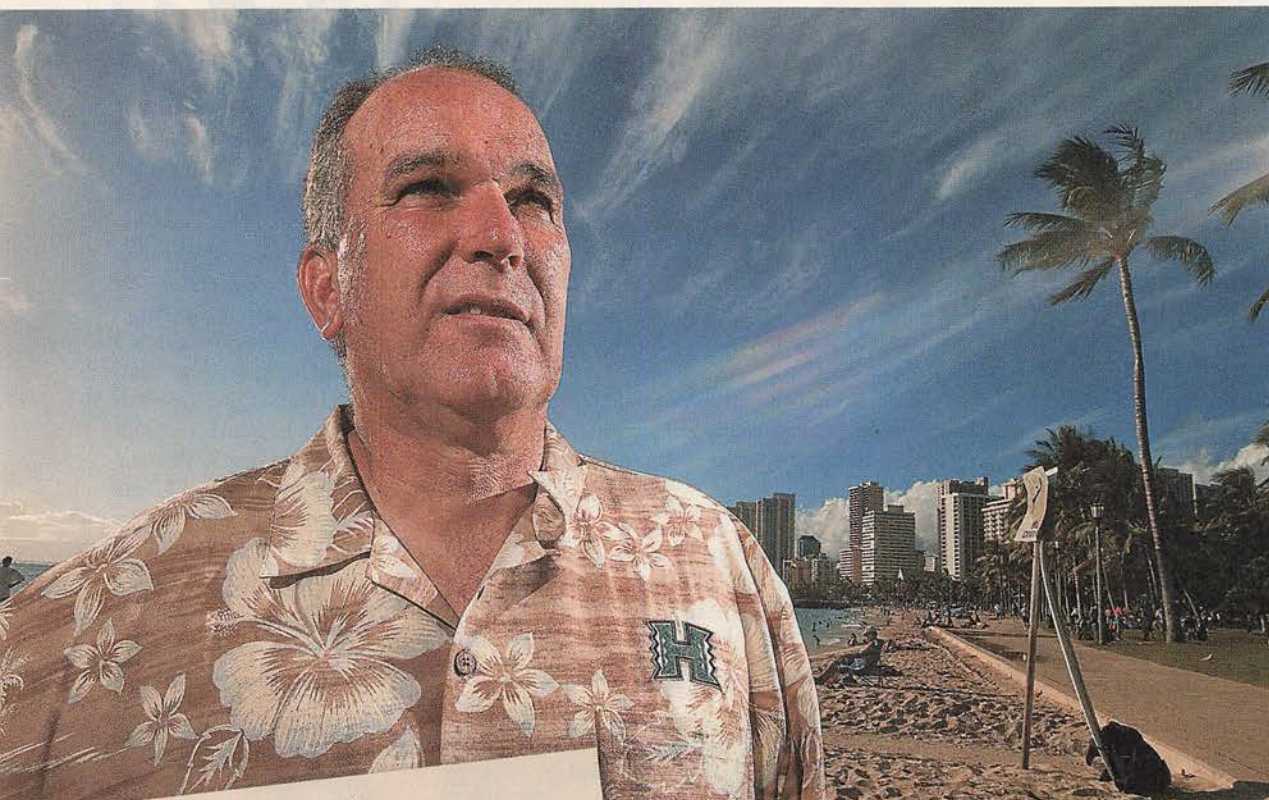
Bowyer (left) and Harvick

INSIDE DISH

One of the early stories out of testing at Daytona has been the strength of Toyota. After a strong first week, the Camrys came right back last week and dominated the first three test runs. The big question is whether that will carry over into the testing sessions later this month at Las Vegas and California, neither of which is a restrictor plate track. > What valuable lesson did Sprint Cup rookie **Patrick Carpentier** take from his second-place finish in last year's Montreal Busch race? "Patience," he says. "That's more what seems to be working. Just patience and working to get the car right and keep working and talking with your crew chief and sending these guys in the right direction."

June Jones will turn things around at SMU—just like he did at Hawaii.

How to win big at a non-BCS school



The report card

Who's now and who's next among non-BCS programs:

Five at the top

- 1. Boise State.** Facilities, support, success—on top after only 12 seasons in Division I.
- 2. BYU.** 22-4, two bowl wins against BCS teams and 16 straight Mountain West victories the past two seasons.
- 3. TCU.** Nine wins per season this decade, with five seasons of double-digit victories.
- 4. Utah.** Terrific facilities; 13-10 this decade against BCS schools.
- 5. Fresno State.** Twelve wins against BCS teams this decade; at least nine wins overall in five of eight seasons.

Five on the way

- 1. UCF.** The best facilities among non-BCS schools; coach George O'Leary isn't going anywhere.
- 2. Florida Atlantic.** A strong recruiting base, and coach Howard Schnellenberger's vision is already paying off.
- 3. East Carolina.** Onetime non-BCS heavyweight is surging again with underrated coach Skip Holtz.
- 4. Tulsa.** No longer a dead-end job; the program is thriving, first under Steve Kragthorpe and now Todd Graham.
- 5. Houston.** New coach Kevin Sumlin will elevate what Art Briles began.

Jones increased the presence of Polynesian players in the program at Hawaii, a strategy that might help him at SMU.

By Matt Hayes

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Wasn't so long ago I was sitting with June Jones on Waikiki Beach and staring into the surf while Island Time eased by. We talked about life and its lessons—not football or run-and-shoot schemes or contract negotiations.

"Sometimes," Jones said, "you have to believe that dreaming can lead to doing."

Few words could translate better to the life of a non-BCS program in a BCS world.

When Jones arrived in Manoa in 1999, Hawaii had just completed an 0-12 season and administrators were debating the future of the program. When he walked away earlier this month, Hawaii had completed a 12-0 regular season before losing in the school's first BCS game.

The transformation under Jones—76 victories, six bowl games, national expo-

sure—can happen anywhere in the non-BCS world with the right combination of vision and commitment. Despite the built-in obstacles, one thing stands clear in the have/have-not society of college football: The rewards of the few are more satisfying than the expectations of the fortunate.

"Hawaii goes to a BCS game, it's a lifetime experience," Jones says. "Georgia goes and the next question is, 'When are you going back?'"

Or in this case, why can't we have a playoff?

The question: How do non-BCS schools reap the rewards of the few? The process:

The coach builds from the inside out.

It's so much more than X's and O's. The key to change begins with identity and culture.

When Jones arrived at Hawaii, the team had lost its ties to the Island people and less than 10 percent of the players on the roster were Polynesian. This past season, more than 70 percent were Polynesian.

When Bronco Mendenhall took over at BYU in 2005, the Cougars had veered from the tough-guy philosophy of LaVell Edwards and become a finesse team with no identity. Since then, BYU has won 21 of 24 Mountain West Conference games and has bowl victories over deep-pocket BCS schools Oregon and UCLA.

The administration builds from the outside in.

The university community must become more involved, both monetarily and emotionally.

When Steve Orsini was athletic director at UCF, he raised revenue for an on-campus facility even though the city of Orlando was in the early stages of planning for renovations

to the aging Citrus Bowl. The Knights opened the 45,301-seat stadium last fall with sold-out home games and were the hosts—and winners of—the Conference USA title game. Before moving to the on-campus facility, UCF was fortunate to draw mosquitoes to the Citrus Bowl.

Now Orsini is doing the same thing at another C-USA school, SMU, which for two decades has been the definition of destitute. He found 20 boosters to contribute \$100,000 a year to support a BCS-type coaching salary (\$2 million per season) and pry Jones away from Hawaii.

Meanwhile, Jones already has connected with Euless Trinity High School—the Class 5A Division I state champion with a strong Polynesian community—near Dallas and Fort Worth. Plus he has this to pitch to recruits in talent-rich Texas: newer facilities (the on-campus stadium opened in 2000), elite academics on a bucolic campus and his record of turning around programs.

The reality is, Jones is in a significantly better situation now—including a more manageable conference—than when he arrived at Hawaii a decade ago.

“The only way for SMU to go is up,” Jones says. “I’m good at going up.”

Dreaming leads to doing.

SN

speedreads

Even though more than 40 players are leaving school early for the NFL, it’s refreshing that many of the elite (Ohio State’s James Laurinaitis, USC’s Rey Mauluga) turned down millions for a college experience the NFL can’t buy.

The NCAA again struck down a proposal to allow text messaging from coaches to recruits, saying it put undue pressure on prospective student-athletes. Now coaches simply will have players do their texting. Seriously, who is smarter than the NCAA?

Good move by Mississippi State to extend coach Sylvester Croom’s contract. Croom has grown fond of Starkville and has a genuine connection with the university and community. And players feed off his discipline. The only thing that can pull him from MSU is the NFL.



Want to trade jabs with Matt Hayes? Submit questions, with your name and location, to mhayes@sportingnews.com and check Matt’s mailbag every Wednesday at sportingnews.com.

If you’re wondering how new Arkansas coach **Bobby Petrino** recruits so well despite a less than stellar off-field reputation, look at **Ryan Mallett**. The former Michigan quarterback could’ve gone anywhere after leaving Ann Arbor when coach **Rich**

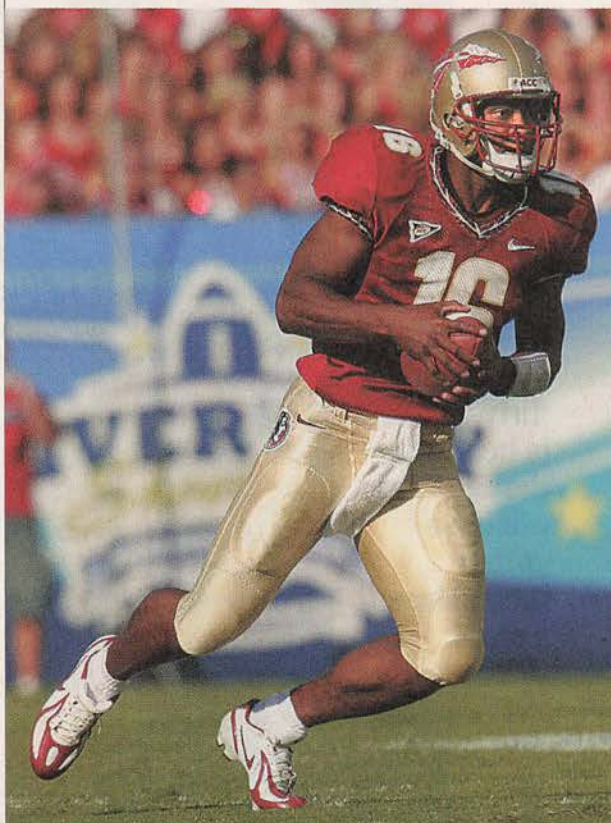
Rodriguez arrived with his new spread option offense, but he decided on Arkansas. Why? Petrino is the best quarterbacks coach in the game. Want proof? Watch how well Arkansas QB **Casey Dick**—34 touchdown passes, 20 interceptions the past three seasons—plays this fall. ➤ Even though Miami coach **Randy Shannon** just finished his first season, he’s in limbo coming off a 5-7 record. Hurricanes A.D. **Paul Dee**, who went out on a limb to hire Shannon, is resigning in June, and his replacement will have to address Shannon’s contract. Shannon has only three years remaining on his deal, and Miami is more than just a quarterback away from returning to elite status. The Canes could have a top five recruiting class, and the new A.D. likely will have to build a contract extension around the hope that Shannon’s on-field success eventually will match his recruit-



ing ability. Yet even there, we see cracks: Two five-star recruits—CB **Patrick Johnson** (LSU) and OL **Matt Patchan** (Florida)—reneged on early commitments. But give Shannon credit for recognizing his mistakes and making changes. He fired defensive

coordinator **Tim Walton** and wide receivers coach **Marquis Mosely** after the loaded defense underperformed and the receivers played with little passion and didn’t fight for balls. ➤ On the surface, **Major Applewhite**’s decision to leave his job as Alabama’s offensive coordinator to become a running backs coach at Texas, his alma mater, doesn’t seem to fit. But the move was based on his future at Texas, which likely will include Applewhite eventually replacing offensive coordinator **Greg Davis**. Applewhite, 29, interviewed to be Houston’s head coach in December and could have had Rice’s top job last year after **Todd Graham** left for Tulsa. Despite his youth, Applewhite is highly respected in the coaching community. Another reason to leave Alabama: He was essentially sharing the coordinator role with **Joe Pendry**, who had significant input in the game plan

even though Applewhite called the plays. Don’t believe talk that Applewhite wasn’t ready to be a coordinator at a major program; the ill-conceived setup was counterproductive. ➤ Florida State’s decision to move enigmatic QB **Xavier Lee** to tight end—Lee quit the team because of it—was more about building QB **Drew Weatherford**’s confidence than it was about Lee. The staff wants Weatherford to be emotionally prepared the entire offseason, without a hint of job controversy. There is hope that **D’Vontrey Richardson**, a talented athlete who has played wide receiver, running back and quarterback during practice, can develop into a legitimate thrower. If not, the ’Noles will enter next season with serviceable sophomore **Christian Ponder** or incoming freshman **E.J. Manuel** as the backup to Weatherford, who has yet to prove he can string together consistent games.



The Seminoles need a backup quarterback, and Richardson could be the man if he throws the ball well this spring.

What Toronto doesn't want: another complaint ... or another injury.

The Blue Jays need the aw-shucks Rolen

By Sean Deveney

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Scott Rolen went on for 1 minute and 45 seconds, talking about his choice of uniform number, stopping midway through his tale to say, apologetically, "This is a long answer." He went on a tangent about how few truly important choices ballplayers make in their lives, saying sarcastically, "We educated ballplayers, we have these big things we have to put up with, like these huge decisions. Like what number am I going to wear?"

Rolen went on to explain, finally, that his wife, Niki, had written down a bunch of numbers and offered them to their 3-year-old daughter, Raine. "And she looks at 'em," Rolen said, "and she points and says, 'Firty-free.' So, Daddy is going to wear number firty-free because my 3-year-old daughter picked it."

That's the Scott Rolen we all want to see, isn't it? The kid from Jasper, Ind., with parents who were schoolteachers, now are retired and follow him around in an RV. The guy who counts Ayn Rand among his favorite writers and, in 2004, said, "I play baseball and I like to read. What makes that odd? What's the matter? It's not crazy." You know, the guy who picks his number because his daughter said "firty-free," the guy who can spin aw-shucks yarns that make you think about calling your mother.

But you have to wonder how authentic that version of Rolen is. Folks around the game see another side of him—distrustful, easily angered, carrying a grudge and eager to place blame on others when things go wrong. It was those traits that caused fans and management in Philadelphia to sour on Rolen, to the point that he was labeled a cancer and booed so incessantly his parents stopped going to games. Again, it was those traits that surfaced when Cardinals manager Tony La Russa went on an anti-Rolen tirade during baseball's winter meetings.

Rolen is not in that kind of mood just now. "To rehash the past, I'm sure there will be a time when that will come up," he said during his introductory press conference. "I'm sure there will be plenty of

time to cast stones. ... I actually don't feel like I have a problem playing for managers. But history, people might think otherwise."

Manager relations, though, is not the chief concern of Rolen's new team, the Blue Jays. First is

health, and Rolen says that after battling shoulder problems for the past three years—he missed almost a third of last season, played only 56 games in 2005 and had his latest surgery in September—he is ready. His power numbers have plummeted since he hit 34 home runs in 2004. He hit five, 22 and eight homers the past three seasons.

If Rolen is healthy, the Blue Jays will have gotten themselves a steal. All they gave up was their own health-challenged third baseman, Troy Glaus, whose foot problems were made no better by playing on Toronto's artificial turf. Glaus is a good power guy, but he was implicated (though not punished) last year for purchasing HGH and is not nearly the defensive third baseman Rolen is. If the shoulder is healed, Rolen remains among the best third



If No. 33—make that 'firty-free'—is healthy, the Blue Jays will have gotten themselves a steal.

Jays president Paul Godfrey is among those hoping the 'authentic' Rolen is the talented good guy.

basemen of all time.

But, with Rolen, there's the threat of personality conflict chewing away team chemistry. That happened with La Russa and with his Phillies manager, Larry Bowa. Then again, Rolen is hardly the first guy to struggle to get along with La Russa. Or Bowa. He did get along just fine with his two other Phillies managers, Jim Fregosi and Terry Francona. And it's worth mentioning that, despite all the problems, La Russa did not want to trade Rolen.

"I don't think he handles it well when things go south," says one longtime front office executive. "I think that is when he gets to being a pain. But, a new team, a new manager—I don't think he is going to go in and start complaining right away. Maybe down the road in a few years."

By then, the Blue Jays will be done with Rolen, whose contract runs through 2010. All the Blue Jays need is a few solid, healthy, well-behaved years from him. Then, maybe, his parents can keep the RV running, he can sit down with a copy of *Atlas Shrugged* and Raine can remind us that she picked forty-free. And we can all say, "Aw, shucks." **SN**

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Gerry Fraley's notebook is jam-packed with baseball news and analysis. Check it out every Monday and Friday at sportingnews.com.

speedreads

The federal inquiry into whether Miguel Tejada lied to investigators about steroids use in 2005 doesn't sink the Astros' chances. The lineup would be better with Tejada, obviously. But the team has remade the top of the order and the bullpen, which could be all Houston needs to do to compete in the N.L. Central.

The Giants' front office was criticized at the congressional hearings on steroids for not speaking up regarding concerns about Barry Bonds and his trainer. But one of the more overlooked points in the Mitchell Report is that, in staff meetings and e-mails, teams routinely discussed steroids use. It's unfair to single out the Giants.

For a month, Bud Selig has been telling us what a bad job he did dealing with steroids in the 1990s. So the owners gave him a three-year extension, which means he'll be the man through 2012. The owners' message is clear: We don't care about steroids, Bud, just keep making us rich.



Making a decision on Varitek will be a key issue for Boston.

Assuming there's no trade for a certain big-name pitcher, the primary issues still lingering for the Red Sox are contract extensions for two key guys—manager **Terry Francona** and **C Jason Varitek**. Francona's extension is a sure thing, but Varitek's situation is a little dicey. He will make \$10 million this season, the final year on his contract, but he will turn 36 in April and has tailed off at the plate. The Red Sox don't have a top prospect lined up to succeed Varitek, but that's not for a lack of trying. G.M. **Theo Epstein** foresaw the need to replace Varitek and, in fact, drafted 10 catchers in 2005 (Boston drafted four total in '04 and '06). The best hope might be **Mark Wagner**, who is solid on defense and hit .318 with 14 home runs last year. Problem is, that was in Class A, where Wagner was still playing at age 23. ➤ The Braves also have a veteran leader with a contract issue: 3B **Chipper Jones**. The team picked up its option on Jones for this year, and the option for '09 becomes automatic if Jones reaches 450 plate appearances, which he has done in 12 of his 13 seasons as a big league regular. It will be interesting to see whether the Braves' new management approaches Jones (who also will be 36 in April) with an extension offer beyond 2009. ➤ Last month, when discussing his rotation beyond ace RHP **Roy**

INSIDE DISH

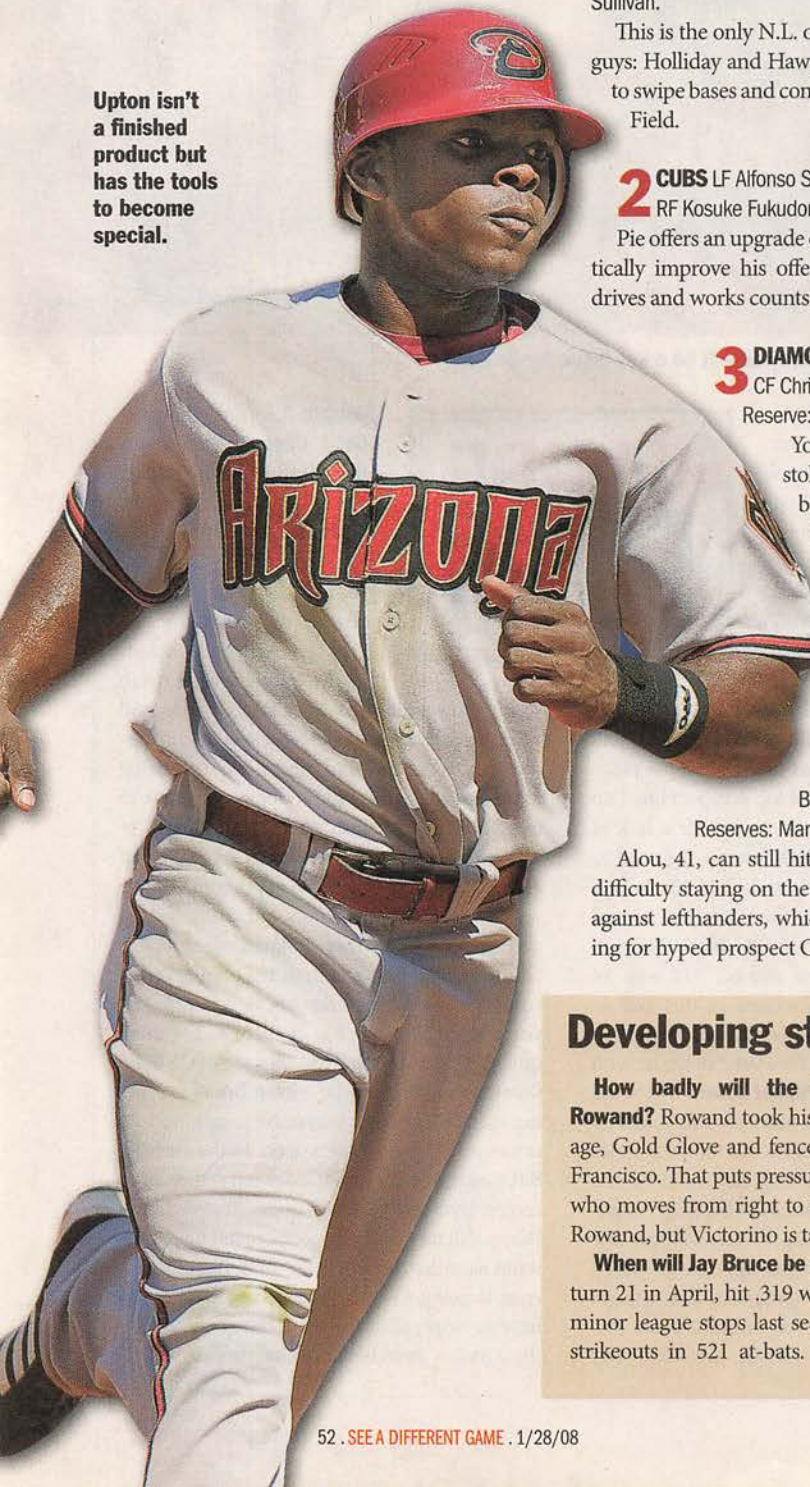
Oswalt, Astros manager **Cecil Cooper** didn't mention RHP **Brandon Backe**. But Backe could be the linchpin in the Astros' plans. He's their No. 3 starter and showed last year he is fully recovered from elbow surgery. He went 7-3, including his minor league rehab starts, and won his final three starts (with a 2.50 ERA) for the Astros. Backe is eager to contribute. Last year, he told reporters that being injured was like "stealing money—you start to feel ... like you are just there wasting space." ➤ The Royals are eager to keep pressure off 3B **Alex Gordon**, whose disappointing rookie year included 137 strikeouts and a .247 batting average. Manager **Trey Hillman** already has Gordon slated for seventh in the batting order, which is where he did his best work last year with a .280 average. He batted .239 in all other spots. ➤ The Brewers' signing of CF **Mike Cameron** made it official—**Ryan Braun** is moving from third base, where he committed 26 errors in 112 games last season, to the outfield. **Bill Hall**, normally an infielder but stationed in center field last year, will move to third, and Braun will take his balky glove to left field. One scout says the move will be a big help: "Cameron is going to do a great job in center. You have to worry about left, but fixing center and third makes them better overall defensively."

N.L. FOCUS ON OUTFIELDS

By Gerry Fraley

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Upton isn't a finished product but has the tools to become special.



1 ROCKIES LF Matt Holliday, CF Willy Taveras, RF Brad Hawpe. Reserves: Ryan Spilborghs, Cory Sullivan.

This is the only N.L. outfield with two 100-RBI guys: Holliday and Hawpe. Taveras has the speed to swipe bases and control the vast gaps at Coors Field.

2 CUBS LF Alfonso Soriano, CF Felix Pie, RF Kosuke Fukudome. Reserve: Matt Murton. Pie offers an upgrade on defense but must drastically improve his offense. Fukudome hits line drives and works counts.

3 DIAMONDBACKS LF Eric Byrnes, CF Chris Young, RF Justin Upton. Reserve: Jeff Salazar.

Young hit 32 homers and stole 27 bases last season but needs to improve his on-base percentage. Upton, 20, must continue to learn on the job but is an up-and-comer. Byrnes provides energy.

4 METS LF Moises Alou, CF Carlos Beltran, RF Ryan Church.

Reserves: Marlon Anderson, Endy Chavez. Alou, 41, can still hit but is having increasing difficulty staying on the field. Church needs help against lefthanders, which could create an opening for hyped prospect Carlos Gomez.

5 ASTROS LF Carlos Lee, CF Michael Bourn, RF Hunter Pence. Reserve: Darin Erstad.

Bourn's exceptional speed will be tested; he must cover plenty of ground to bail out Lee. The energetic Pence hit .322 as a rookie.

6 BREWERS LF Ryan Braun, CF Mike Cameron, RF Corey Hart. Reserves: Joe Dillon, Tony Gwynn.

Cameron has lost some range. Though he strikes out too much, he works counts and takes walks. Hart is an emerging talent. Braun moves from third and has to learn a new position, but there is no questioning his bat.

7 REDS LF Adam Dunn, CF Jay Bruce, RF Ken Griffey. Reserves: Ryan Freel, Noris Hopper.

Dunn and Griffey hit 70 homers combined in 2007 but didn't produce a whopping RBI total (199). Griffey adjusted to handling the different angles in right. Freel can play anywhere in the outfield.

8 BRAVES LF Matt Diaz, CF Mark Kotsay, RF Jeff Francoeur. Reserves: Josh Anderson, Brandon Jones.

Kotsay is a good defender when healthy. He's keeping center warm for Jordan Schafer, who could be ready by summer. Diaz hit .318 against righthanders and .356 against lefthanders but still could end up in a platoon with Jones.

9 DODGERS LF Juan Pierre, CF Andruw Jones, RF Andre Ethier/Matt Kemp. Reserve: Delwyn Young.

Adding Jones should help a power-starved outfield. Pierre stole 64 bases in 2007 but had the

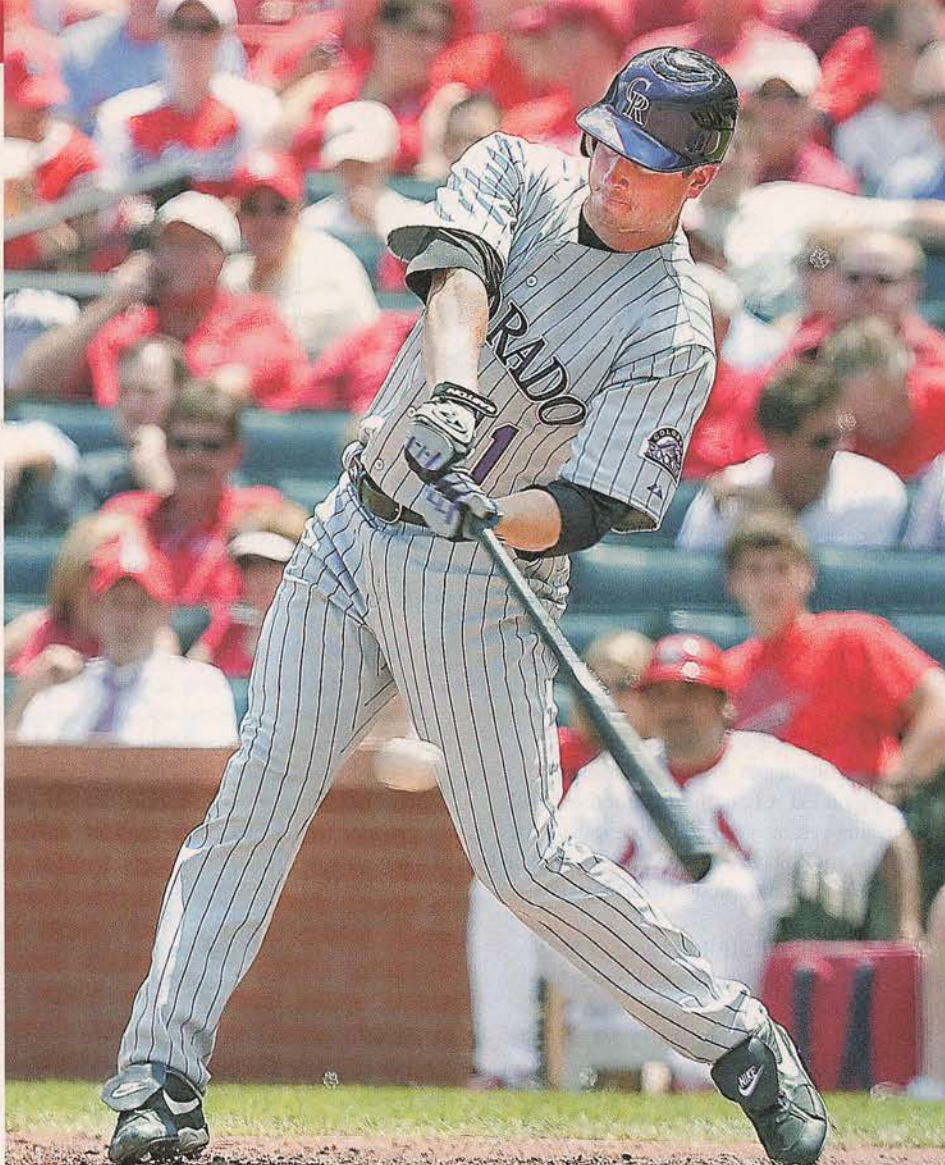
Developing stories

How badly will the Phillies miss Aaron Rowand? Rowand took his 27 homers, .309 average, Gold Glove and fence-crashing style to San Francisco. That puts pressure on Shane Victorino, who moves from right to center. He may not be Rowand, but Victorino is talented.

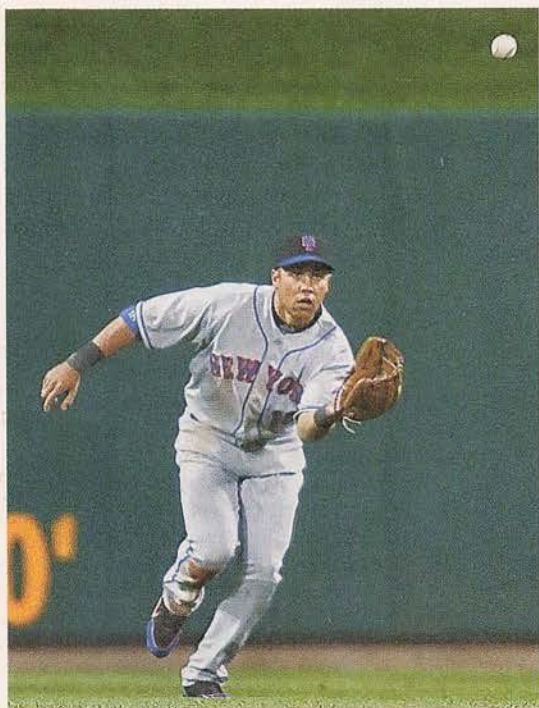
When will Jay Bruce be ready? Bruce, who will turn 21 in April, hit .319 with 26 homers at three minor league stops last season. He also had 135 strikeouts in 521 at-bats. With Ryan Freel and

Norris Hopper able to play center, the Reds can have Bruce start the season in the minors.

How much better will the Dodgers' defense be? Not only was Juan Pierre toothless at the plate last season, but opponents showed no respect for his low-caliber arm by taking the extra base at every opportunity. New center fielder Andruw Jones will force opponents to be more conservative. Pierre is moving to left, where his defense surpasses that of predecessor Luis Gonzalez.



Hawpe often gets overlooked, but it's hard not to take note of the 116 RBIs he had in 2007.



TOP5 Outfielders

1. Matt Holliday, LF, Rockies. He led the N.L. in batting average and RBIs and ranked fourth in homers last season. Holliday hits the ball the other way with authority.

2. Carlos Beltran, CF, Mets. He is coming off a season in which he hit 33 homers, drove in 112 runs and won his second consecutive Gold Glove. The ding in Beltran's game is he doesn't hit for a high average.

3. Jeff Francoeur, RF, Braves. He just turned 24 and already has two 100-RBI seasons and one Gold Glove. Francoeur has as good an arm as any outfielder.

4. Carlos Lee, LF, Astros. He would fit best as a DH, but his shaky play in the field is offset by his production at the plate. Only four players have more RBIs over the past five seasons.

5. Alfonso Soriano, LF, Cubs. His power and relatively low on-base percentage make him miscast as a leadoff hitter. But, no question, he's a threat wherever he hits.

worst on-base plus slugging percentage (.685) among N.L. outfielders.

10 PHILLIES LF Pat Burrell, CF Shane Victorino, RF Jayson Werth/Geoff Jenkins. Reserve: So Taguchi.

Burrell is capable of explosive stretches but remains a defensive liability. Jenkins' long swing always leads to 100-plus strikeouts.

11 NATIONALS LF Wily Mo Pena, CF Lastings Milledge, RF Austin Kearns. Reserves: Ryan Langerhans, Rob Mackowiak.

Milledge must mature to get the most out of his top-rate talent. Kearns is still looking for his first 90-RBI season. Pena is a terrible defender but is capable of 35-plus homers.

12 PADRES LF Scott Hairston, CF Jim Edmonds, RF Brian Giles. Reserve: Paul McNulty.

Edmonds, who's becoming increasingly ineffective against lefties, and Giles, who is coming off knee surgery, are 37 and in decline. Hairston has power but has never had 350 at-bats in a season.

13 CARDINALS LF Chris Duncan, CF Colby Rasmus, RF Rick Ankiel. Reserves: Ryan Ludwick, Skip Schumaker.

If the highly touted Rasmus isn't ready, Ankiel will play center. Ankiel returned to the majors in grand style but hit .220 in his final 91 at-bats. The club hopes the dip in Duncan's average—he hit .209 in the second half—was because of a sports hernia.

14 PIRATES LF Jason Bay, CF Nyjer Morgan, RF Xavier Nady. Reserves: Chris Duffy, Nate McLouth.

Bay's production declined for the second straight season as opponents handled him with inside fastballs. Morgan is a slap hitter with good speed. Nady improved by not trying to pull every pitch.

15 GIANTS LF Dave Roberts, CF Aaron Rowand, RF Randy Winn. Reserves: Rajai Davis, Nate Schierholtz.

Rowand won his first Gold Glove last season, but how will he fare away from Philly's cozy park? Winn hits for average but isn't a big RBI guy. Schierholtz could steal time from Roberts.

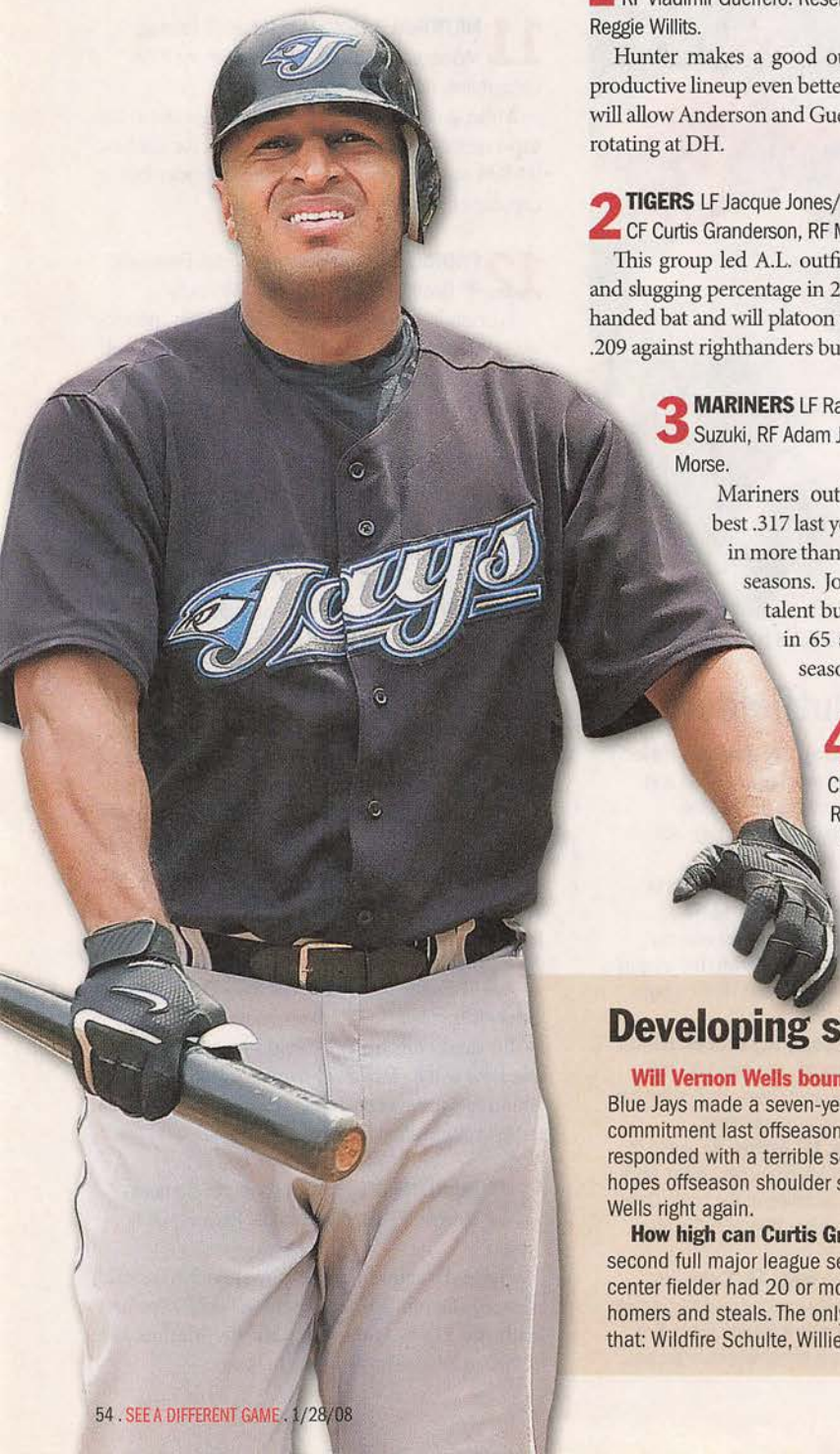
16 MARLINS LF Josh Willingham, CF Cameron Maybin, RF Jeremy Hermida. Reserve: Cody Ross.

Hermida showed more power in his second season. Maybin, 20, had 21 strikeouts in 49 at-bats with the Tigers last season, but the Marlins can afford to let him grow in the majors.

A.L. FOCUS ON OUTFIELDS

By Gerry Fraley

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1 ANGELS LF Garret Anderson, CF Torii Hunter, RF Vladimir Guerrero. Reserves: Gary Matthews, Reggie Willits.

Hunter makes a good outfield defense and a productive lineup even better. Matthews' presence will allow Anderson and Guerrero to get breaks by rotating at DH.

2 TIGERS LF Jacque Jones/Marcus Thames, CF Curtis Granderson, RF Magglio Ordonez.

This group led A.L. outfielders in homers, RBIs and slugging percentage in 2007. Jones adds a left-handed bat and will platoon with Thames, who hit .209 against righthanders but .310 against lefties.

3 MARINERS LF Raul Ibanez, CF Ichiro Suzuki, RF Adam Jones. Reserve: Mike Morse.

Mariners outfielders hit an A.L.-best .317 last year. Ibanez has driven in more than 100 runs the past two seasons. Jones, 22, has loads of talent but struck out 21 times in 65 at-bats during a late-season trial.

4 RED SOX LF Manny Ramirez, CF Jacoby Ellsbury, RF J.D. Drew. Reserves: Coco Crisp, Brandon Moss. Ellsbury won the

job late in the season, but Crisp still has value because of his exceptional defense. The club believes Drew's production will pick up in his second season in the A.L.

5 YANKEES LF Johnny Damon/Hideki Matsui, CF Melky Cabrera, RF Bobby Abreu.

Damon, whose average and on-base percentage dropped for a second consecutive season, and Matsui will shuttle between DH and left field. Cabrera has superior range and a stronger arm than Damon. Abreu had a big second half but can be too passive.

6 INDIANS LF David Dellucci, CF Grady Sizemore, RF Franklin Gutierrez. Reserve: Jason Michaels.

Gutierrez handles fastballs and lefthanders. The club didn't get much out of Dellucci before he missed three months (hamstring). Michaels is better in the corners but can be used in center in a pinch.

7 RAYS LF Carl Crawford, CF B.J. Upton, RF Cliff Floyd/Jonny Gomes. Reserve: Justin Ruggiano.

Crawford and Upton have a rare combination of speed and power. Upton could grow into a 30-homer, 30-steal performer. Gomes, like many Rays, strikes out way too much.

8 BLUE JAYS LF Reed Johnson, CF Vernon Wells, RF Alex Rios. Reserve: Matt Stairs.

Rios is growing into a power hitter—something the club never expected. With Wells (shoulder) and

Developing stories

Will Vernon Wells bounce back? The Blue Jays made a seven-year, \$126 million commitment last offseason to Wells, and he responded with a terrible season. The club hopes offseason shoulder surgery will make Wells right again.

How high can Curtis Granderson go? In his second full major league season, the Tigers' center fielder had 20 or more doubles, triples, homers and steals. The only other players to do that: Wildfire Schulte, Willie Mays and Jimmy

Rollins, who also pulled off the feat last season. Granderson raised his average by 42 points and cut his strikeouts by 33 in 2007.

What to expect from Manny? Manny Ramirez enters the final year of his deal with Boston, which increases the possibility that he'll flake out if he decides to express displeasure with his in-limbo status. Ramirez, 35, was great in the postseason, but in the regular season he failed to drive in 100 runs for the first time since 1997. Is that the start of a trend?

Johnson (back) limited last season, the outfield's offense slipped. This is a good defensive group.

9 WHITE SOX LF Jerry Owens/Carlos Quentin, CF Nick Swisher, RF Jermaine Dye. Reserve: Pablo Ozuna.

Swisher does not track balls well in center, but he was acquired to boost the offense of an outfield that ranked last in the A.L. in RBIs. Owens and Quentin combined for only 48 RBIs in 585 at-bats last season. Owens runs well and plays good defense.

10 TWINS LF Delmon Young, CF Jason Pridie, RF Michael Cuddyer. Reserve: Craig Monroe.

Some scouts consider Young, 22, to be the game's best young hitter. Cuddyer's power numbers dropped in '07, but he had 19 assists in right. Pridie figures to get a shot, though he's probably not ready.

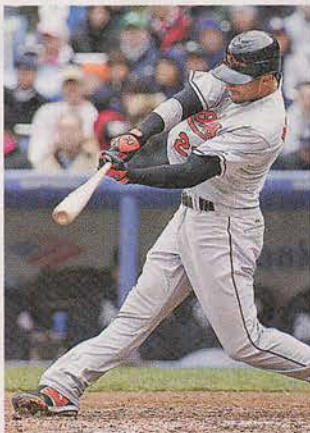
11 RANGERS LF Marlon Byrd, CF Josh Hamilton, RF Milton Bradley. Reserves: Frank Catalanotto, David Murphy.

If Bradley (knee) isn't 100 percent, the club will shuffle corner arrangements. The team believes Hamilton will be stronger this season after getting

back into playing condition following a lengthy suspension. He'll be tested by a home park that has tricky winds and vast gaps.

12 ROYALS LF Jose Guillen, CF David DeJesus, RF Mark Teahen. Reserve: Joey Gathright.

Guillen, who is with his ninth team, brings needed punch; the Royals got 23 homers from their outfielders in 2007. Teahen may never hit for power. DeJesus had problems against lefthanders last season.



The O's outfield has one good thing going for it: Markakis.

13 ORIOLES LF Luke Scott, CF Jay Payton, RF Nick Markakis. Reserve: Tike Redman.

Among A.L. right fielders, only Detroit's Ordonez drove in more runs than Markakis. The club could bring back Corey Patterson and push Payton into a platoon in left with Scott, a newcomer.

14 ATHLETICS LF Travis Buck, CF Chris Denorfia,

RF Emil Brown. Reserve: Todd Linden.

Brown led the Royals in RBIs in each of the past three seasons but averaged just 76 in that span. Denorfia will get his first shot at center. This group could be shaken up if prospects Carlos Gonzalez and Ryan Sweeney show they are ready.



TOP5 Outfielders

1. Magglio Ordonez, RF, Tigers.

He hit .363 overall and .429 with runners in scoring position last season, both best in the majors, and his 139 RBIs was a career high.

2. Vladimir Guerrero, RF, Angels. No outfielder has driven in more runs (475) over the past four years. He has a great arm, but nagging injuries and a glut of Angels outfielders could land him at DH more often.

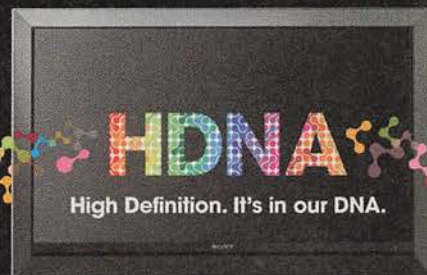
3. Torii Hunter, CF, Angels. He has won seven consecutive Gold Gloves and is coming off a 28-homer, 107-RBI season. Playing on a grass field will help his legs.

4. Grady Sizemore, CF, Indians. A Gold Glove defender, he has three consecutive seasons with 20-plus homers and 20-plus steals.

5. Ichiro Suzuki, CF, Mariners. He won his seventh straight Gold Glove last season but his first in center. He hit .351, which boosted his career mark to .333. A lack of extra-base hits is his only flaw.

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EXPOSURE

Chest match

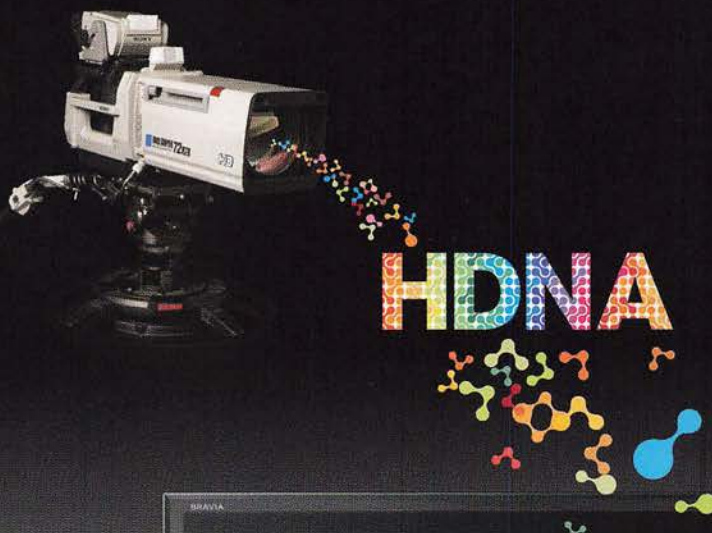
Somehow, when Maryland outlasted unbeaten, top-ranked North Carolina, the lesson that slow and steady wins the race came to mind. Tortoises, er, Terps James Gist (left) and Bambale Osby, who scored the winning points, came out of their shells during Saturday's upset special at Chapel Hill.

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